A TOM SLADE STORY

THE PARACHUTE JUMPER

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

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DONOVAN SCREAMED, "CUT ME LOOSE, CAN YOU? *CUT ME——*"
The Parachute Jumper—A Tom Slade Story. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 24)

A TOM SLADE STORY

THE PARACHUTE JUMPER

BY

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

Author of

THE TOM SLADE BOOKS
THE ROY BLAKELEY BOOKS
THE PEE-WEE HARRIS BOOKS
THE WESTY MARTIN BOOKS

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THE PARACHUTE JUMPER

CHAPTER I

WAITING

TOM SLADE climbed down out of the biplane, took off his helmet and strolled about, somewhat to the amusement of the little group of people who had assembled to see him depart. He cast a rueful smile at a man who seemed to be in authority, then sauntered off and back again, with an air of good-humored impatience.

"Maybe he stubbed his toe and was killed," observed a waggish bystander.

Everybody laughed, as if that would be a ridiculous calamity to befall the person in question.

"The kind of trips *he* makes, when he starts he usually keeps going," said another bystander. At which Tom, pausing abruptly, laughed outright.

The group increased, and still Tom wandered about in a kind of ludicrous despair. One would have thought that he was accustomed to this sort of thing. There were some fifty or more people waiting.

Not that seeing an airplane take off was anything unusual at the Brentway Airport, for it was a very popular field and planes were going up and coming down every hour of the day. It almost rivaled a railroad terminal in arrivals and departures.

There were frequent tryouts; hurried, brief flights with preoccupied mechanics. An occasional awkward take-off or freakish landing bespoke the student at his lesson. These novices would climb down, their faces joyous with pride and exhilaration. Now and again one would be seen smiling sheepishly at his own bungling manœuvre as he emerged, safe and sound, out of enveloping clouds of dust. Less often, attention would be attracted by an alighting airman from some distant point, and at these little centers of interest one might hear Chicago or St. Louis glibly mentioned as if they were neighboring towns but a few moments' journey from this New Jersey airport.

At the edge of the vast field were the buildings of the Brentway enterprise, hangars, offices, and the large manufacturing plant about which disjointed and damaged fragments of aircraft lay—wings without planes, planes without wings, discarded engines, broken propellers, wheels and endless lengths of tangled wire. The wreck of an old biplane, which defied reconditioning, bore silent testimony of grim disaster.

Through the great open end of the largest hangar, the curious visitor (and these were numerous) might have seen a vast spread of brownish fabric caught up at its edges and sagging in the center, completely obscuring the rafters and girders above. A number of ropes fastened at definite intervals to its circumference, were gathered to the center below it.

This vast spread of light fabric was a parachute —it had probably been hung there, partly for ornament, and partly for exhibition. Perhaps it had been spread there to dry. Looking at it, no one would have supposed that it could be rolled up into a compact little bundle, as easy to carry as a small traveling bag. Nor would one have believed that such a little bundle could be depended on to unfurl

itself gracefully in mid-air and interpose between its passenger and death.

Near this vast, half open structure, stood a picturesque little brick building in which the clicking of typewriter machines could be heard through the open windows, audibly proving that everything pertaining to aircraft has become a business. Here indeed were commerce and adventure working hand in hand. And this thought must have constantly recurred to visitors at this seething unit of a new and great industry. Everywhere was a strange blending of the humdrum and the spectacular.

Out of this office building hurried a young man in his shirt sleeves casting a perplexed glance over to the center of the great field, as he ran toward the big hanger. Here he paused just inside the entrance and called to a couple of mechanics who were varnishing the repaired wing of a large biplane.

"Didn't that jumper get here yet—the guy for Slady?"

"Haven't seen any," one of the men answered. "Isn't that Slady over there where the crowd is?"

"Who'd he get—Tony?" asked the other mechanic, half interested.

"Tony busted his leg," volunteered his companion.

"He busted both his legs," said the young man from the office. "This chap Slady got—he comes from somewhere in South Jersey. We just had a long distance call from Oakvale Fair Grounds in Connecticut. They wanted to know when the plane will get there. It should have been there at two o'clock and it's half past two now."

He did not pause for any more talk—he had only looked in at the hangar because it was at this spot that the parachute jumper would enter the airport. He hurried across the field, calling to the waiting airman whose patience lessened as the group increased.

"Hey, Slady, where's your devil?[1] We just got a 'phone call from Oakvale and they're all fussed up. Can you start pretty quick?"

"Not till he gets here," said Tom.

"Who is he, anyway? Why didn't you get Mack?"

"His name is Billy Donovan," said Tom, pausing to haul a letter out of his pocket. He gave it

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[1] vil—short for daredevil, the airman's familiar name for a parachute jumper.

a cursory glance, then: "And he comes from—let's see—South Jersey—Mayville. Do you know how far that is?"

"Well, what are you going to do?" the young man from the office asked anxiously. "The rubes at the fair grounds are having a fit. Can't you get Mack?"

"He's over at Curtiss Field," said Tom, "and Tony has made his last jump, I heard. This bimbo was recommended to me by the Wright people. Is Oakvale waiting on the 'phone?"

"Sure, what'll I tell 'em?"

"Tell 'em I'll hop off in fifteen minutes and if the devil isn't with me I'll do some stunts for them. Tell 'em to get their fortunes told and eat peanuts and look at the five legged calf, and take chances on stale candy, and I'll be along when I get there. Tell 'em to watch out and the first thing they know the jumper will land in the lemonade booth. What time is it now, Billy?"

Billy did not answer. Indeed he did not hear the question for he was running straight for the office.

CHAPTER II

THE WHITE METEOR

MEANWHILE the belated hero, Billy Donovan, was speeding along the road in an old ramshackle Ford to keep his promise to Tom Slade. He was anxious, and reckless, for he needed money. He had passed a stop signal down in the neighborhood of Perth Amboy and they had delayed him fifteen or twenty minutes to give him a brisk lecture and a ticket. For the next hour he drove his sorry little car at a breakneck speed.

It was along the open road a mile or two south of the airport that he made a spectacular jump without his parachute. A dilapidated front tire blew out, the old rattle-trap swerved against a tree, went tumbling over the crumbling culvert and halted upside down in the low lying field.

Billy Donovan did not look at all like a spectacular hero (the White Meteor, he called him-

self) as he crawled out from under his wrecked Lizzie with a scratch and a look of perplexity upon his rough countenance. His white trousers and white sweater, worn to make him conspicuous in mid-air, were bespattered with mud. He clutched his left arm with his right hand, soothing a bruise. It seemed rather ludicrous that this young fellow whose business it was to exhibit himself in perilous feats, should receive his first injury in a most inglorious descent from nothing more romantic and thrilling than a six year old Ford.

But in truth, the White Meteor was a commonplace enough young man when seen close at hand. He belonged to the race of steeplejacks and bridge jumpers and it was his sprightly trade to afford thrills to the patrons of amusement parks and suburban carnivals by jumping out of airplanes and descending amid clustering and spellbound throngs. Then a collection would be taken up for him, and sometimes it seemed as if this was not worth coming down for. He always told the promoters of these festive enterprises to announce his daring "feat" with the grim pleasantry that "if the chute fails to open, the collection will be used to buy

roses." He had great faith in this quaint suggestion of tragedy, and perhaps it did increase the number of nickels and dimes.

But first and last, Billy Donovan's business was in a bad way. "Wid these ameytoors, and all them army guys, de stunt is all shot," he was wont to say. He even specified where it was shot to. "Dey'll be learnin' it to boy scouts next," he said. "Me, I ain't done but eleven hops dis season, and I'm lucky if I get ten bucks out of a hick carnival." He had even thought of accepting the rather novel job of being shot out of a cannon in a circus. "You hits de net and it's a hundred bucks a throw," he had commented.

You will appreciate, therefore, with what dismay he contemplated the utter wreck of his little car. He had been summoned by Tom, who had never met him, to do his act at the Oakvale County Fair in Connecticut and he had permitted himself to hope that the thrilled pleasure seekers might "loosen up" and make his rather long journey worth while. And here he was about two miles distant from the place of taking off, and his trusty chariot a ruin.

A ruin indeed! He limped down into the field

and looked it over. The spare tire in the rear, on whose cover was printed,

BILLY DONOVAN
THE WHITE METEOR

had been completely wrenched off and flattened by a jagged piece of metal which had pierced it in two places. A rear wheel was shattered, one side of the body stove in, the windshield smashed into a thousand fragments, and the steering gear bent and broken beyond repair. Poor Billy knew that to restore his car would cost the sum total of many hat collections.

Suddenly he bethought him of the one thing in his car needful in his distant engagement—his precious parachute. Crawling under the wreck, he recovered this, a rectangular package that might easily have been sent by mail. Carrying it under his arm he ran with might and main along the road until he came to a crossroad where there was a sign which read TO BRENTWAY AIRPORT. He turned into the side road and ran like mad.

In a few minutes he emerged from surrounding woodland, and there, upon the wide meadows in the distance, he could see the buildings of the air-

port, a lonely cluster, in the vast surrounding meadowland. On closer approach he could see that the biplane just the other side of the big hangar had painted in great black letters on her gleaming silver hood, the name *Goodfellow.*

"Dat's me, I guess," Donovan observed without lessening his speed. "It sounds like the name that guy wrote in the letter. Some fancy moniker fer a ship. Here's hopin' it'll mean luck and bring home de bacon."

And that was his creed, perhaps the creed of every professional parachute jumper. Always it was Donovan's hope that the imminent jump would be *the* jump—the one that would most assuredly bring home "de bacon." It seemed never to occur to him that there would one day be a jump which would be the means of death instead of the means of sustaining the frail thread of life to which he clung.

To be sure he thought of death very often, but never in regard to himself. Pilots and passengers, mechanics, and myriads of jumpers had been killed since first he entered the stunt field, but certainly it would not happen to him. He had maintained a stubborn superstition since the beginning of his

hazardous business. "Me, I'm too tough to die," he would say lightly. "Sure, I'll die sometime, but I'll never smack de earth, I know dat," he would add confidently.

This prophecy was not uttered today; there wasn't time. He gave no heed to anything but the biplane waiting for him, and to save precious time he wriggled himself into his parachute as he ran past the hangar. Certainly he fairly radiated energy and life and as he pulled on his helmet and goggles he called in a lusty voice to the patient Tom, "You Slade?"

"Uh, huh. You Donovan?" Tom returned briskly and put his right foot up on the step plate.

"Sure. My Lizzie took a flop over in the dump."

"On the turnpike?"

"Yeh. Glad tuh meet you, Slade." Donovan showed a row of firm, even teeth in a pleasant smile and put out a large brown hand whose little finger was adorned with a silver snake ring.

Tom gave the ring a brief glance, then firmly clasped the proffered hand and idly wondered whether the eyes hidden behind the dusty goggles were as steadfast as the hand shake that the jumper gave him. He was sure that they were.

"All right, Donovan," he said briskly. "In a few more minutes they'll be getting tired of waiting. I'll give 'em a few loops when we get there to quiet them down, then I'll whistle your cue through the earphone. O. K.?"

"Oke," Donovan agreed cheerfully and climbed into the forward cockpit. As he belted himself in, he whistled gaily.

The crowd cheered and Tom smiled thoughtfully. The engine started with a terrific roar and he let it idle a moment while the temperature gauge worked itself out of the red. Then they took off and while they were climbing he listened at the 'phone. Donovan was whistling through it, a new and popular melody.

Tom laughed outright. It was a great life—while it lasted.

CHAPTER III

ALL IN A LIFETIME

ALL the way to Oakvale, Donovan whistled. Tom enjoyed it immensely and said nothing over the 'phone to break the spell, but vowed to compliment him afterward. It was inspiring.

When they reached the fair grounds Tom gave all his attention to the crowd that was watching below. The place was black with people and as he put the plane in an easy turn he was glad for Donovan's sake. Those ant-like creatures represented a good many nickels and dimes to the impecunious 'chute jumper, and from the threadbare appearance of his soiled flannel trousers and woolen sweater he could make good use of a thousand dimes.

Tom brought the plane into a gentle spiral so that he could get a better view of the throng. Fifteen hundred people, perhaps more. Donovan ought to do well if every heart down there beat in

the right spirit and there was every reason to think that they would.

To begin with, the Oakvale Carnival was a sort of combination scout rally and town anniversary celebration rolled into one. Oakvale was twenty-five years old and its scout troop had been active for fifteen years. Colin Campbell, a national scout figure, was an honored guest and principal speaker and Tom was doing his bit also with the *Goodfellow*. And Donovan. . . .

Tom smiled again at the thought of him and let the plane climb energetically. They were probably taking up the collection for Donovan right now. The scouts would do that and from vast experience with scouts, Tom knew that they would do it well. If they didn't get what was coming to them they wouldn't be scouts.

The *Goodfellow* climbed and Tom kept a wary eye on his altimeter. He wanted to get two thousand under him, and he glanced over at Oakvale Lake lying serenely beside the fair grounds, narrowing at one end into a sort of cove. There was someone in the cove—a figure in a boat, perhaps a fisherman.

Tom took a little dive in order to get enough

speed to carry them over and in doing so noticed that the wind was blowing quite briskly toward the lake. It fairly carried them over without the engine's help and when they were on an even keel once more he listened at the 'phone and heard Donovan say, "Good boy!"

"Glad you liked it," Tom said with a hearty chuckle. "Scouts like thrills and this is their day. We'll give them a real fancy spin. What say?"

"Oke," answered Donovan and fell to whistling.

Tom laughed, centered his controls and brought the *Goodfellow's* nose up quite perkily. When they came rushing out of their dive to an even keel, Donovan breathed, "Hot dog!" through the 'phone.

"Some kid," Tom thought. "A spirit like that deserves all that those people down there can give." And through the 'phone he said: "I'll give them three good loops. It'll warm their hearts and loosen the purse strings. Eh?"

"You tell 'em," Donovan agreed lustily.

Tom grasped the throttle and told them, once, twice, three times in graceful loops. He could see the crowd standing motionless, huddled together

around the fair ground buildings. It seemed to be an auspicious moment.

"Guess you can do your stuff now, kiddo," Tom said through the 'phone. "All set?"

"Yep," answered Donovan gaily. "See you b'low."

"Sure thing. Good luck, kiddo, good luck!"

Tom kept the *Goodfellow* at an even keel as Donovan crawled out along the wing. The boy was like a monkey, sure-footed as well as sure-handed. Not once did he hesitate. Oh, well, they were all alike, these jumpers. After the first jump it was mere play.

Tom gave the crowd one more glance. Still motionless, with the exception of a few moving figures. He hoped it was the scouts still collecting for Donovan. Funny, how he had taken such a liking to a chap whom he wouldn't know without his goggles. They'd have to get acquainted later over a glass of watered lemonade and a hot dog.

Tom got a flash of white and from the corner of his eye saw Donovan standing upright and holding on to the stanchion. He fancied that he saw the jumper's lips part in a gay smile, but could not be certain for the next moment he was gone—into the

wind. He had just a fleeting glimpse of the boy's hand clutched to the handle at his breast.

Tom pushed his stick forward instinctively and quite unconsciously counted from one to five, as if he too were going through that appalling moment before the 'chute opened its silky fabric to the sun-lit heavens. When he had finished counting he eased the plane around and cast an apprehensive eye earthward.

But there was no cause for worry—the 'chute had opened.

Tom laughed heartily at his fears and started to cruise around until he could be sure that Donovan was safe on terra firma once more. "You'd think I was a stude or something," was the way he explained it to himself. "Never thought twice about other jumpers dumping themselves off from my wing. Goodnight, I guess I've fallen, hook, line and sinker, for that kid's good natured whistle. That's about what it is."

Out over the lake he went, chuckling at the crowd surging back and forth below. Donovan was traveling fast now—the wind was rushing him as if he and the 'chute were mere feathers. It didn't look so favorable after all.

Tom gave the parachute an anxious glance and saw that for a moment it was inclined to take Donovan straight down on the fair grounds. But the wind was stronger and although the jumper might be using every bit of strength he had to pull the ropes landward, it would be of no avail. The wind was carrying him straight toward the lake.

Tom hovered anxiously over the sunlit water and saw that the people, too, were a little apprehensive. They were surging toward the lake. Then the 'chute swept out and for a second seemed to hang precariously in mid-air. Another second and it was borne along toward the cove and out of the crowd's sight.

Tom's heart beat a furious rat-tat-tat against his breast as he saw the parachute dropping steadily down, down, down into the waters of the cove. But, what was that figure moving down there? Oh, yes. He remembered, hopefully.

The lone fisherman. Would he save the jumper? Or didn't the poor kid stand a ghost of a chance? Tom blinked and turned the *Goodfellow's* nose around. The crowd was still at the water's edge and it gave him plenty of room for a landing. The quicker the better.

He made a few hurried spirals and called himself a fool. It was all in the game—Donovan was nothing to him, and a professional jumper at that, but nevertheless he could hardly see to gauge his landing, the tears so blurred his eyes. Then he shut down the motor.

"It's a great life," he murmured grimly as he planted his feet firmly on the rudder bar. And added: "If you don't weaken."

CHAPTER IV

THE LONE FISHERMAN

THE young man in the flat-bottomed boat had been watching the plane since first it soared into view over the fair grounds. The occasional tugs at his line were ignored, so intent was he on the stunting aircraft. He adjusted his smoked glasses and for a few moments the lines of perplexity across his forehead seemed to have smoothed themselves out.

Who was he?

Certainly Oakvale could not answer that question and since it was their local gossip, Ike Higgins, who first saw him rowing his boat up from the creek and thence through the cove to Two-by-Four Island they were satisfied to consider him as "just another one of them there summer campers making themselves right ter home on Bainbridge's island." Ike was inclined to think differently, however, for

he was strongly romantic by nature and he liked to think that behind the young stranger's smoked glasses, romance lurked.

"I wuz havin' a nice quiet catch all by myself," said he willingly, "when that there young man rows around from the creek and through the cove. Next thing I know he's anchorin' in at the island and I could see him a-carryin' off supplies from his boat and all that time he paid no more attention ter me than ef I wuzn't out on that lake. He's a poet feller turned hermit, I bet," he added sagaciously.

"Or some poor sap disappointed in love," the Don Juan of the town said with a sigh.

"Wa'al, I guess Bainbridges won't come back frum Europe ter disturb him any," said the owner of the general store. "They've been there too many years ter come back now unless they want ter sell. Anyhow, I don't care what this here stranger is, as long as he takes a notion ter come over an' be my customer. Hermits with smoked glasses don't bother me—a customer's a customer!"

This very much discussed young man fulfilled none of these prophecies, however. He did not prove to be a poet become hermit, nor was he disappointed in love. Neither did he become a cus-

tomer at Oakvale's general store for the gods had something to say about that.

To be sure, the young stranger seemed not to have been forewarned as to what motive the gods had in placing him on Oakvale Lake when the biplane *Goodfellow* first put in her appearance. But that he was forearmed was evident in the opened pocket knife which he held in his hand. However, he was blissfully unaware that a fickle destiny would have any designs on this lowly implement for it had been used in the various tasks that camp life demanded. In point of fact, he had just finished cleaning some freshly caught fish when the crazily looping plane arrested his attention.

And then Donovan made his dramatic leap from the shimmering wing of the biplane.

The young man adjusted his smoked glasses on his nose and rubbed the handle of the knife between his palms nervously as he watched the daring jumper being blown earthward. He held his breath as Donovan's parachute suspended him above the trees and a cry escaped his lips as the wind swept it out toward the lake.

Suddenly the dangling legs of the jumper were rushed along over the water and toward the cove.

The young man stood up in his boat, conscious of a strange sense of foreboding. He grasped the blunt edge of his knife, clasping it shut and unclasping it time and again.

Presently the wind abated and Donovan was dropping as straight as an arrow. Then he screamed.

"Cut me loose, can you? *Cut me. . . .*"

The young man did not wait to hear more. He gauged the distance from the boat to where the jumper seemed likely to sink and dived swiftly. His hands and arms swung out frantically leaving yards of foaming water behind. Then suddenly he was aware that the jumper's feet touched the surface of the lake and in blind desperation he flung his whole body forward to the rescue.

A second later the brownish silken fabric of the parachute had spread itself over the spot and bobbed buoyantly in the sunlight looking not a little like some camper's tent in a state of complete collapse.

A crow circled high above the pine trees on Two-by-Four Island, crying raucously.

CHAPTER V

LOST HERO

TOM divested himself of jacket and helmet and reached the lake just in time to get into one of the rescue boats. A trim little launch it was and filled to capacity with scouts. The other boat, with outboard motor, listed to one side under its burden of Ike Higgins and the general store keeper who were audibly lamenting the jumper's sad fate.

"It may not be as bad as that," Tom called to them. "He's got a puny chance but it's a chance just the same. There was a fisherman in the cove and I'm certain I saw him dive off to help my jumper."

"It's that there hermit, I bet," said Ike Higgins.

"Gosh a-mighty," said the general store keeper. "We got ter help him."

The launch roared off in the lead with a khaki clad figure hunched determinedly over the wheel. All eyes were fixed on the bend and now and again

some scout would glance deferentially at Tom, eager to be of service.

Suddenly the launch swung around the bend and into the cove. The scout sitting next to Tom tugged at his sleeve and whispered, *"Jiminy!"*

A figure was swimming slowly away from the gaily floating parachute.

"Good heavens!" Tom cried. "Just one?"

"Just one is right," said the scout at the wheel. "He's a lucky feller."

The motor purred and the launch swung over into the path of the swimmer. Tom scrambled his way up to the bow of the graceful craft and squeezed himself into an advantageous position. No one spoke.

"He's hurt," said the scout at the wheel. "He's bleeding across his forehead. *Look,* he's waiting for us—he's floating!"

Tom got to his feet and saw that the swimmer was indeed waiting, almost wearily. He was paddling with his right arm to keep himself afloat and every motion revealed the upper part of his body clothed in a white sweater.

"Donovan!" cried Tom. "It's *he!"*

Two of the scouts dived overboard and sup-

ported him while the launch swung over and got in a position to receive him. Then they lifted him in carefully and to Tom's consternation he was too dazed to speak.

Someone produced a blanket and after wrapping him in it, they laid him down, pillowing his head in Tom's lap. A scout pushed forward and proceeded to render first aid to the gash across the temple and several other cuts that were bleeding profusely.

"What did the fisherman do to you, Billy?" Tom asked as the deep blue eyes looked questioningly up into his. "Cut you all to pieces?"

Billy nodded and his lips parted in a smile that revealed the firm, even teeth that had captured Tom's fancy back at the Airport. "You blue-eyed Irishman," said Tom playfully poking him in the ribs. "I might have known there were blue eyes behind those goggles of yours. They'd have to be to go with those teeth and that smile. Am I right?"

"Oke," answered Billy faintly, but still smiling.

Tom laughed heartily. "That sounds like you, all right. You'll be fine and fit in a little while. You were just shocked seeing that poor fisherman go down, huh?"

Donovan nodded.

The motor boat came chugging up. "It's my jumper, all right," Tom said in answer to their queries. "He's all cut and we'll go on back, but you fellows hunt around under that parachute and see if you can find that poor fisherman."

The general store keeper leaned over on his side of the motor boat and stared. "You mean that that there hermit feller what Ike calls him, is *drownded?"*

"It looks that way," said Tom. "Donovan here is pretty weak from loss of blood and hasn't said. Wait, I'll ask him." Tom turned his head round and looked down into Billy's smiling face. "Did the chap swim to shore by any chance—the fisherman?"

Donovan shook his head weakly. "He sunk right before—me—*drowned,"* came the whispered answer. Then he shut his eyes.

"He's fainted," said the first aid scout.

"Sure as you live," said Tom worriedly. "Let's get back to shore as quickly as possible."

And as the launch roared back to its destination the general store keeper was heard to sigh wearily.

"What's th' matter?" inquired Ike Higgins.

"It jes' ain't fair," the store keeper explained. "Here that parachute jumper went and done me out of a prospective customer. Jes' as if business ain't bad 'nuff."

"I know," said Ike Higgins sympathetically. "No use cryin' 'bout spilled milk, though. Let's see ef we can find the last o' him anyway."

And so the motor boat chugged on toward the parachute.

CHAPTER VI

AN INVITATION

DONOVAN was given medical care and after a hypodermic slept soundly on the cot behind Heinie's Hot Dog Stand which was situated at the farther end of Oakvale's Fair Grounds. Heinie had risen to the occasion and not only had offered the use of his bed but also his complete Sunday outfit which Donovan was to return as soon as he was able, for his own clothing had shrunk into a pitiable state.

There was a considerable lull in the day's activities. Most of the pleasure seekers and merry-makers were scattered on each side of the field, some in their cars, some sitting under the trees eating camp suppers. There were to be fireworks as soon as night came on and many were wishing away the bit of salmon-colored sunset that lingered in the west. Tom was not the least of these albeit the

fireworks had no place on his program. His wish was inspired by the doctor's promise that Donovan would have sufficient rest and be well enough to leave Oakvale at eight o'clock. It was then seven-thirty o'clock.

Tom bought another hot dog from Heinie (he had long since lost track of how many he had eaten that afternoon) and went back to the little partition which served as the refreshment man's bedroom during the summer season. He nibbled nervously at the savory sandwich while watching the peacefully sleeping figure on the cot. Soon Donovan stirred and blinked his eyes.

"You awake?" asked Tom anxiously.

"Mm, but I'm dopey," came the answer sleepily.

"That's the hypo, kiddo," said Tom soothingly. "Listen, kid—I've got a few things to tell you. Can you stand it?"

Donovan put his hand to his bandaged head and sat up. "I—I can stand anything after this, I guess. What is it now?"

"First of all, I'll tell you the good news. Your collection came to almost a hundred and fifty. A hundred and forty-nine dollars and fifty cents to be exact!" Tom reached in his pocket and brought

forth a paper bag bulging with the jingling coins. He held it up. "Not many jumpers haul that in these days, Billy kid. But what you've gone through to-day is worth a thousand, huh?"

"You said it. *Man alive!*" Donovan looked up in amazement.

"I knew you'd be glad."

"What about that . . .?"

"Fisherman? That's what I was going to tell you about. They didn't find him—not a sign. Must have gone right down to the creek and out to the sound. They'll probably never find him and that washwoman, Ike Higgins, that you heard talking in the motor boat—he took them over to the island and they went through the poor chap's effects."

"Did they find anything?"

"Nothing. Only a suitcase with some odds and ends of clothes. There were initials on the luggage, though—W. A. O."

"Sounds like a broadcastin' station," Donovan observed with sparkling eyes. "Aside from that, it's pretty tough."

"You can tell 'em," said Tom. "But try and not think about it, Donovan. It's all in a jumper's life."

"I—I'm not keen on that stuff any more."

"Jumping?"

"Yeh. It was awful—like a rat in a trap. I wouldn't mind hittin' the grass, but *water—never again!*"

Tom reached out and put a friendly hand on his shoulder. "We all have our weak spots, Billy. That's yours and I don't blame you. What would you like to do—fly?"

"Bet your life."

"Fine. I'll teach you sometime. But before we go into that, I want to tell you. . . . I'm due up in the Adirondacks tonight—Leather-stocking Camp it's called; a training camp for scoutmasters. I do a dozen and one odd jobs around there during the course of a summer season. Now the point is, Billy, if I don't get up there before eleven they'll think I'm not coming and they'll put out the beacons on the field. And I've made up my mind to go there to-night. That's one thing about me—I like to do what I set my mind on doing, so I ought to be starting pretty quick. But first I want to let you off wherever you want to go. The doc says you ought to take things easy for a little while and I want to help you on the first lap anyway."

"You're a good feller—uh . . ."

"Call me Tom if you like—Slade sounds too formal," Tom interposed smilingly.

Donovan glanced up and grinned. "How about Slady? I like that still better."

"Anything, Billy kid. But to get back to the question of the moment—where would you like to go?"

Donovan chuckled. "To tell the truth I'd like to go with you, Slady."

Tom laughed outright. "I'd like you to go too. Nothing I'd like better, Billy, but I suppose you have someone depending on you—you couldn't afford to lay off and knock around up there with me the whole summer, could you?"

Donovan laughed. "No one's depending on me, Slady—no one," he said a little wistfully, then: "And as for being able to afford it—you forget I'm rich." He held out the bag and jingled the coins.

"So you are," Tom laughed. "Well, then that simplifies things. Certainly you look as if you need some of that good mountain air and we'll see that you eat plentifully."

"Won't I be able to pay and help around a little bit?" asked Donovan thoughtfully.

"Forget it," said Tom. "Just whistle like you did coming over from Brentway Airport and you'll

earn your board. Anyway, Billy, I have the privilege of having a guest every summer. I had invited a friend of mine, Brent Gaylong, to do the honors but he 'phoned me before I left Bridgeboro this morning and said he couldn't make it until the end of the season. So what do you say?"

Donovan's eyes lighted up. "I'm on!" he said enthusiastically. Then he glanced down at the borrowed finery he was wearing—Heinie's Sunday best. "I'll have to get these things back to this place somehow. I can buy a few rags up there, though, can't I?"

"Sure," Tom answered. "But haven't you any home—any clothes at all, Billy?"

Donovan chuckled sardonically. *"Clothes? Home?"* he repeated. "Slady, I'm like the turtle when it comes to home and clothes. What I've got. . . ."

"Is right before my eyes, eh?" Tom interposed. "In other words you hide nothing and your home is wherever your hat hangs. Well, there's something refreshing in that, too. Except that it's a lonely life. You poor kid, that's all the more reason why we ought to double up. We'll fly away together, eh?"

"Away from it all," Donovan returned in mock tragic tones. "We'll take the gold and let the rest of the world go hang."

"Righto," Tom agreed and put his hands under Donovan's slim shoulders. "You'll be feeling pretty shaky for a day or two, kiddo, so I'll help you hobble out to my bus. Now!" Tom felt his body tremble as he got to his feet. "Gosh, you're pretty well shot, eh? But then you've been through a whole lot."

"You don't know the half of it, Slady," Billy said, with an inexplicable shadow in his deep blue eyes.

CHAPTER VII

EN ROUTE

"I WOULDN'T mind coming back some day soon and look over Two-by-Four Island," said Tom as he tucked Donovan in with an old army blanket.

Billy smiled wistfully. "Whatever you say, Slady," he said.

"All set," said Tom, belting him in. "See if you can wriggle your arms free in case the old bus decides to caper any."

Donovan wriggled and put his arms through, much to the amusement of a gathering curious throng.

"Chute on O. K.?" Tom asked briskly.

"Oke," Donovan answered laughing. "You're some nurse, Slady. Think of everything, don't you?"

"One close shave's enough in a day," said Tom. "I'm a cautious pilot, Billy. Never ride without a

'chute—superstitious about it almost. Got a hunch it keeps the hard luck away." He adjusted his own and climbed into the cockpit.

"Who ever thought I'd be sitting here to-night," said Donovan. "Gee, I have to pinch myself to see whether I'm dreaming."

"You're not dreaming by any means, Billy," Tom said, turning around and leaning over the fuselage a moment. "You're darn lucky when you think of it. I'd like to hear about it sometime when you feel like talking about it."

"I'll tell you some time, Slady," Donovan said quietly. "Only just now I—I can't. Those eyes of his, the ropes . . . gee, I can't talk about it now. It starts my head aching again."

"I know—don't try," said Tom. "Some day when things are going kind of slow we'll hop down here and look the island over. We'll see if we can find what made the poor chap so mysterious—that is, if our friend Ike hasn't made it impossible. Maybe you'll feel like telling me then."

Some of the scouts who had made possible the generous collection for Donovan crowded close to the plane saying good-bye. Some shouted an invitation for the pair to come again to Oakvale.

"And the next time we'll see that the wind isn't blowing toward the lake," said one, noted for his timely witticisms. "We'll have it blowing straight toward Heinie's place so you can snatch a hot dog on your way down."

Tom laughed and looked at Donovan but that young man was not smiling. He was looking into space and something akin to pain filled his eyes. Then he pulled into place the pair of goggles he had borrowed from Tom. His own were somewhere in Oakvale Lake.

"This thing has hit him hard," Tom thought. "He's seen that poor chap coming to save him and after that was accomplished the tables turned. Yes, it's certainly hit him hard. It's happened like that to the bravest of 'em. Just let them see someone else die in front of their eyes and it's ten times worse than if it was themselves. Well, in the future the less said about it to him, the better."

Tom straightened up and slipped into place. He called good-bye to the admiring assemblage and presently the starter whined followed by the roar of the motor. Donovan did not turn once nor did he speak through the 'phone until they were high among the shadowy clouds of approaching night.

Then he said, listlessly, "Glad you thought of this blanket, Slady. I *could* feel better."

"Sure, you could," Tom answered. "The doc said you'd be running a little temperature so keep yourself warm at least. We won't be long getting there. You're still a sick kid, Billy, and a few days in bed won't hurt you. You look underweight anyhow, so Leatherstocking is some break after all your misfortunes, eh?"

"Some break is right," Donovan answered. "I'll never forget you for this, Slady—*never!*"

"Think of yourself, kiddo," Tom returned with a ring of feeling in his voice. "Your cue is to toughen up and fatten up so's you can spread your wings again."

"To fly?" asked Donovan whimsically.

"To fly," Tom answered with a hearty laugh. "I've a feeling that I'm responsible for you. I don't know why."

"It's good you don't," Billy returned and settled down under the blanket. He was silent the rest of the journey.

North, northeast, northwest they went over the blinking lights of sleeping villages. At one time, Tom lowered his altitude in order to get a glimpse

of the Delaware and Hudson tracks. There was a fascination in the way the steel rails gleamed through the darkness looking not a little like an endless stretch of sparkling ribbons. He called Donovan's attention to it.

"Can't see it so well when the stars are out," he explained. "What do you think of it?"

"I can't bend my head, Slady, it hurts too much. But I think I'd like it all right—I don't seem to be able to think of anything to-night. *Man alive*—do you think I'll ever be the same again?"

"Absolutely, positively," said Tom. "When you're a stude you'll not be able to think of anything but the bungles you make and that's scheduled for Monday at the latest. You'll have plenty to think of that won't concern yourself or your troubles, kiddo. A stude's life isn't so easy, not if he intends being a hundred percent airman. You've got to learn your air, believe me. Well, Billy, we're passing over Harkness now. Next is Leatherstocking, and *home* for the present."

"Home!" repeated Donovan. "Man alive, that sounds good."

Tom picked out Leatherstocking's beacons, made a few gentle spirals and gauged his landing.

A few seconds later they rumbled across the smooth field and rolled to a stop.

"Well," said Tom as he helped Billy out of the cockpit, "how does this strike you?"

Billy pushed the goggles up on his forehead and looked about in the dark night. The mountains loomed up formidably on either side with Old Hogback's crest almost obliterated in the dark heavens. Off in the distance he could see the mists of Weir Lake draping the camp buildings like so many huge spider webs. Lights blinked from the cabins and from the main lodge came a perpendicular stream of light where the door had been opened. Two deep male voices called Tom a welcome.

"That's Counsellor Wainwright and Don Ellison," Tom explained. "No one's boss here exactly. We all work together and we get along tiptop. They don't know I have company or they'd be out here to meet you. We'll walk in on them and surprise them. Tell me first, Billy—will you like it?"

"No reason why I shouldn't," Donovan replied, allowing himself to lean heavily on Tom. "It's nice and still; I've always wanted to go to the mountains. Sure I'll like it. It's sort of out of the world like, huh?"

"Out of the world is right, Billy," Tom agreed. "And that's one thing you want to forget about."

"What's that, Slady?"

"The world. We forget about it when we're here. You try it—it's easy."

Donovan said nothing but walked on with Tom's help, his eyes fixed on the stream of light issuing from the lodge. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance and a company of frogs croaked dismally from the lake.

Tom felt Donovan's fingers clasp tightly around his arm.

"What's the matter, Billy?" he asked anxiously.

Billy laughed nervously. "I guess I'm going crazy or something, Slady. That owl and those frogs sent the shivers through me. Spooky, huh?"

"Spooks my eye," said Tom trying to laugh him out of the mood. "Just for that I'm going to make you eat some to-morrow."

"What—spooks?" Billy chuckled.

"No, frogs," Tom returned.

"Man alive!" Donovan said heartily. "I'm cured."

"Atta boy," said Tom. "Atta boy!"

CHAPTER VIII

GHOST RIDDEN?

THREE days later, Donovan was allowed to get up and have his noon-day meal in the eats shack. He sat at Tom's right in company with Don Ellison and Counsellor Wainwright who thought him rather taciturn and shy, and quite the opposite of Tom's generous word pictures concerning the brave jumper.

Don Ellison mentioned it after supper that same evening while they were waiting for Donovan to return from Tom's cabin with a pack of cards which he had offered to get. They had cleared the big center table in the lodge and were looking forward to a quiet evening game for four. Counsellor Wainwright was putting a log in the fireplace and as it sunk into the flames the clean woodsy smell of pine was diffused throughout that great living room.

Tom inhaled it pleasurably and glanced through

the side window toward his own cabin across the way. A light flashed on as Donovan entered it and his head and shoulders could be seen as he passed the center window in going toward the table. He would be back in a minute or two.

Tom strummed his fingers along the arm of the big chair in which he was sitting. "That's not it, Don," he said. "Billy *isn't* taciturn or shy. At least you wouldn't say that if you had met him before that jump. I never heard such whistling. He says he hasn't the heart to whistle any more. I guess we just can't realize what a terrible shock he's had. The doctor says it sometimes takes months for a chap to come out of a daze like that."

"You don't think there's a little spark of cowardice in his makeup, do you?" Counsellor Wainwright asked, turning from the fireplace.

"No more than in any of us, Wainwright," Tom answered stoutly. "He doesn't give a darn about his own life, I happen to know that. He told me last night that the sensation he got under that 'chute in the water was terrible. Like being in a prison from which he'd never escape. Why, he just can't talk any more than that about it. You can see it sort of suffocates him when he thinks of it. He

likes to talk about this place, though—says the mountains and air are so free and cool that he could jump around them fifty times a day if he had to, but he'd always be afraid that the wind would blow him into the lake and under the 'chute. He gasps like when he tells me that. Poor kid."

"Well, we'll have to kid him right out of it," said Don Ellison, a young fair-haired man of about Tom's age. "I suppose we'd be a great deal worse than he if we went through the same ordeal, eh?"

"That's what I say," said Tom.

"And then it has been said that the bravest of warriors will run from a mouse," Counsellor Wainwright said with a smile.

The sound of footsteps was heard crunching along the gravel path. Presently the door of the lodge opened and Donovan entered, the pack of cards in his hand. He smiled shyly, walked across the room and laid them down on the table.

"I thought I'd never find them," said he nervously, looking from one to the other.

"Weren't they on the table, Billy?" Tom asked him.

"No," Billy answered, seating himself in the willow chair alongside of Tom. "I forgot I'd been

doing tricks with them while you kept me in bed and they had slipped down behind my bunk."

"So you're one of those card trick chaps, eh?" Don Ellison asked.

Billy brightened considerably. "Yep," he answered with a great deal of spirit. "That's my high spot—tricks. I know some that would knock your eyes out."

Tom, Ellison and the counsellor exchanged significant glances.

"Well, we'll see some of them when we get tired playing, eh?" Counsellor Wainwright said.

"Sure," said Billy, almost gaily. "Suits me. I could try out tricks all night."

Tom laughed heartily and beamed at Donovan. "You're coming on, kiddo."

Billy seemed to find himself through the remainder of the evening and responded quite readily to the little pleasantries that were exchanged between hands. He even so far forgot the past as to indulge in a hearty laugh at Tom's expense, when he won from him four games. Fresh from those triumphs he undertook to set out before their eyes a number of tricks. It was in the midst of this that they heard a screeching of chickens from the poultry

yard. In its wake came the angry voice of Happy, the camp chef, who was calling malediction down upon something.

Tom rose from his chair and hurried to the door. Just as he opened it there fell upon their ears a most plaintive wail, eerie and almost blood curdling, coming as it did out of the night's deep silence. Counsellor Wainwright and Don Ellison followed Tom out of the lodge, but Donovan did not move out of his seat and a strange, horrified expression spread over his features.

"What's happened, Happy?" Tom called from outside the lodge door. "That lynx again?"

"Yes suh—dat lynx again," Happy replied. "He am one turrible nuisance, dat animal, Massa Tom. Ise would like nuthin' better'n to take a pop at dat thief, but he's allus too fast fer me."

"What did you do to him just now, Happy?" asked Mr. Wainwright. "What made him cry?"

"Ah slung dat big monkey wrench at him and whacked him 'cross de back, suh," answered the indignant Happy. "Ah heered dem chickens rustlin' 'round out dere kinda restless like and ah wuz almos' asleep, but ah comes out jes de same, and ah wuz in time tuh hear dem screechin' like ol' Harry

n' right away I knew it wuz dat pesky animal. When ah turned mah flashlight on de coop ah sees him slinkin' off like de sneak he is and also ah sees two ob our prize hens lyin' nice an' dead. Ah picked up dat monkey wrench 'cause it wuz de handies' but I sho am sorry it wasn't a gun, fo he wuz near 'nuff ter git a good shot at him. As 'tis ah guess ah whacked him plenty."

"From the sounds of things," said Tom. "Never mind, Happy, I'm going to call Harkness in the morning and get game-warden Crothers to give us permission to pop off that pest. It'll be fun following up his tracks and finding his lair and whoever sees him first may shoot, eh Wainwright?"

"Yes, and good riddance," the counsellor agreed. "All told, we've lost two dozen healthy fowl through that rascal."

"Well, we won't lose any more tonight, not with the send-off Happy gave him," Tom said laughing.

"And dat send-off won't prevent him comin' back in a week agin," said Happy mournfully.

"We'll track him down before that, Happy," Tom said reassuringly. "We'll get on the job tomorrow and you won't lose any more chickens."

"Ah sho hopes so," said Happy with a yawn. He

called a sleepy goodnight and they heard the door of the employees' cabin shut with a bang.

When the counsellor, Don Ellison and Tom entered the lodge they found Donovan still sitting as they left him. He was in an almost rigid posture and it wasn't until Tom spoke that he relaxed, not a little abashed.

"What's the matter, kiddo?" Tom had said.

"Gee, man alive, Slady!" he exclaimed in a frightened voice, "I sure had the wits scared out of me that time. Did you say it was a lynx?"

"That's what," said Tom puzzled. "They're terrible cowards, though, Billy. They'd run a mile from a man. It's the damage they do to livestock and property and even crops, that we get after them for."

"Gee, Slady," said Donovan, sitting forward in the chair, "gee, you don't think that of me, do you? Man alive, I'm not afraid of things like that—not live things—do you know what I mean? It was the way he cried that got me. I—can't seem to stand spooky cries like that."

"I understand, kiddo," Tom said sympathetically. "Just brace up and keep your thoughts off the

spook stuff. Would you like to help me track down that chap tomorrow?"

"Sure," answered Donovan with that far away look in his blue eyes. "Sure, I'll like it."

"Can you hit the bull's eye?" Don Ellison asked laughingly.

Donovan looked up, a slow wistful smile spreading over his face. He nodded. "I learned when I was a kid—my father taught me. He—he was a sharpshooter in the army once."

"Well, you're the boy for me," Tom said. "Off we go tomorrow, then. I'll show you some tricks in scouting, eh Billy?"

Billy smiled and rose from the chair. "I'm on," he said, but not with his usual ardor, and added, apologetically: "I'll be keen for it tomorrow all right, Slady. I'm just feeling kind of shaky from that spooky cry. Guess I'll get over to bed, huh?"

"Sure," said Tom, feelingly. "It'll do you good. We might have a longer hunt tomorrow than we figure on. I'll be over in a minute, kiddo."

They waited until his footsteps died away on the gravel and the light switched on in the cabin.

"Poor kid," said Tom, "he certainly needs

friends and cheerful company, eh? I'm glad it was in my power to bring him here."

"He'll get over this mood when you have him knocking around the mountains for a while," said Don Ellison. "The poor boy hasn't been doing anything else but think of that tragedy—it's time now he gets out in the air and sees something besides his own shadow."

"I know it, Don," Tom agreed. "I didn't realize it before, but the poor kid's actually ghost ridden. *Actually ghost ridden!*"

CHAPTER IX

THE TRAIL OF THE LYNX

"WELL," said Tom briskly, as he sat down at the breakfast table next morning, "Crothers said we have his permission to track down that pesky lynx. We'll be doing him a big favor he said and the sooner the better. I just had him on the 'phone."

"Gee, that sounds pretty good to me," said Donovan, looking up from a pretty fair breakfast plate.

"That's what I like to hear," said Tom. "So eat up strong, kiddo, and I'll get Happy to do up a little lunch in case it's an all day hike. Think you can stand it?"

"Stand it!" Billy repeated, crunching a piece of toast between his front teeth. "Gee, I can stand anything this morning, Slady. I slept like a top and I feel twice as well as I ought to."

"You'll need to feel as well as that to track a lynx," said Tom almost bolting his food. "They're pretty tricky sometimes."

"Then you've tracked one before, huh?" Billy asked, interested.

"Hope to tell you," Tom answered. "Two of 'em."

"Man alive! And you got 'em, did you?"

"One we did and the other's a long story. It happened our first year here. I'll tell you about it some time. Just now I want to rush into the kitchen and get Happy to fix us a little lunch before he goes out to feed the chickens."

A half hour later, Tom and Billy emerged from the kitchen door bearing their respective lunches. The sun shone in full splendor and a light breeze was all that saved the morning from being a scorcher. Tom looked about him thoughtfully.

Billy grinned. "Where do we go from here, Slady?" he asked whimsically.

Tom laughed. "I'm going over to the cabin and get my Winchester, kiddo. You stay here. I'll be back in a second. We make our start at the chicken coop."

He hurried away and was back before Donovan stopped smiling. "What's the idea, Slady—why the chicken coop?" asked Billy with evident amusement.

"That's where Mr. Lynx staged his show last night, wasn't it?" Tom returned. "Well, that's where I'll pick him up from. Follow me, kiddo, and see if you can learn." He hoisted his gleaming Winchester over his right shoulder and looked for all the world like a modern Daniel Boone in his khaki negligee.

On he went straight toward the chicken coop, with Billy following close at his heels. There he stopped for five minutes, circling and recircling the hennery and even going in the poultry yard to study some depressions in the earth that looked anything but interesting to a layman. Tom evidently didn't think so for he came out, smiling.

"We start from here," he said, pointing to a flat sort of mark in the earth. "That's an imprint of Mr. Lynx's dainty little hoof. That's what we follow. All we have to do is to keep our eyes out that it doesn't disappear entirely. All set, kiddo?"

"Sure," said Billy highly amused. "But I guess I'll let you do the tracking, Slady. I'll do the shooting."

"Of course you can do the shooting, kiddo, but you've got to learn tracking. Just keep your eye out like I've told you."

They started and paused only once on their way across the little stretch of camp field to wave goodbye to Don Ellison and the counsellor who called them from the lodge balcony. They were remaining in camp to receive the first contingent of would-be scoutmasters who were due to arrive that morning.

"I'm kind of glad we're alone," said Billy, when the encroaching pine forest hid them from the camp's view. "It'll be sort of different being alone like this for a whole day, huh? They're nice enough guys, Slady, but I can talk to you better."

"Sure you can," said Tom sympathetically. "Don and Wainwright are fine chaps, Billy, but they're a little harder to get acquainted with, that's all. They'd like to bend more if they knew how. With me, it's just because I've been mixing with kids all my life. I've knocked around with all kinds of kids."

"I could tell that right off," said Billy looking at Tom's broad shoulders and back admiringly. "And you're an orphan too, huh Slady?"

"Very much," Tom admitted. "I dragged myself up out of Barrel Alley in Bridgeboro and that's the truth. Barrel Alley is no more, though. Thank goodness for that! It was one awful slum."

"Gee, you wouldn't think it," said Billy. "To look at you, it's hard to believe it. But that just shows a feller can live down things—I mean if he's really honest he can be something in the world no matter what people say about where he came from or what he did before, huh?"

"I'll say so," Tom agreed. "I was some kid in those days. Didn't know what honesty meant hardly. How's a kid to know unless someone tells him? I've proved that in my own life because once I knew the difference I never had any desire to go back."

"And you really—*swiped* things?" Billy asked dismayed.

Tom turned and nodded. "Why, did you ever?"

"No, Slady," answered Billy vociferously. "I never did."

"Well, you've got that much less to regret," said Tom and went on.

He paused now and again to examine the ground or scrutinize some underbrush or tree that they passed. He was so detached and preoccupied for the next half hour that Billy had not the heart to disturb him with a question that was on his mind.

He followed Tom up the mountainside, obedi-

ently, admiringly, watching him as he verged to right or left, acting, apparently, on the hint of some stone or trampled bit of underbrush. Once when they were well upon the second ledge, he stopped and in whistling preoccupation studied the ground at his feet.

"You see a gold mine or something, Slady?" Billy asked laughingly.

"Nope," Tom answered. "I've only noticed that our friend has backtracked here three feet or so and headed east."

"Hmph," Billy commented following the line of Tom's outstretched arm, "what does that make us?"

"Scouts," Tom chuckled. "A scout has to learn to go through all kinds of brush when he's tracking, Billy. It's pretty tangled looking in through there but nevertheless that's where the rascal's gone. Are you scout enough to follow me?"

"Absolutely," answered Donovan with his wide smile. "I won't get poisoned or anything like that, huh?"

"I can't exactly guarantee that, kiddo," Tom answered, turning into the brush. "If you crave pois-

oning you have three ways of it up here—sumac, toadstools and the dainty little rattler."

"Man alive—*rattlesnakes?*" he asked horrified.

Tom laughed. "Sure, you don't expect garter snakes in the Adirondacks, do you?"

Billy made a grimace as if the thought of it was distasteful to him. "Gee, I can't see one of those things sneaking up on me and making me like it."

"They don't sneak up on you, exactly, Billy," said Tom. "My friend, Brent Gaylong—the one I told you about—he always says that the one thing he likes about them is that 'they're sure to give you a rattling good welcome!' It about hits the nail on the head, what?"

"Too much," said Billy affecting a shudder. "I hope I never hear any rattling welcomes from them, believe me."

"It's all in the life of a scout, kiddo," Tom said. "Now I bet you'd rather jump any day, huh?"

Billy's wide smile seemed to freeze. "Nope," he blurted out at length. "Anything but that, Slady—*anything.*"

Tom winced at the hurt look in Donovan's eyes. He was all apologies. "We won't refer to it again,

kiddo, that's a fact. I'm like some old lady that can't forget the past, eh?"

"You are not," Billy answered, smiling again. "It's me that's the old lady. Maybe this place is spoiling me, huh? Man alive, I'm getting so I don't like to think about anything but just here and now."

"The immediate present, eh?" Tom returned and being the true scout forgot entirely the subject of their conversation for the more important signs on the trail.

He gave his bronzed-looking hair a toss and scrambled down into a grassy gully just beyond. When he came up he was holding aloft the rather tattered looking remnants of a chicken's foot.

"Here's something for my scrapbook," said he, vigorously kicking the mud of the gully from his shoes.

"And you went down there just for that, huh?" asked Billy looking nonplussed. "What's the idea —it looks like the tail end of a tourist's lunch."

"No tourists ever come in these parts, kiddo," Tom explained. "Three miles to the nearest road and it's *some* road! You can swim it in the spring. The nearest state road is ten miles from there. Wouldn't like to get lost hereabouts, eh?"

"Not on your life," answered Billy vociferously. "I'd be a goner if I did. I wouldn't know when a trail's a track or a track's a trail."

Tom laughed heartily. "I can see you need a lot of training in scout lore, kiddo. We'll see about that after lunch. Just now I'm darn hungry, aren't you?"

"Always am. But man alive, how about the great discovery you just made, huh? How about the tracks?"

Tom gave the chicken's foot a toss back in the gully. "That's a sign that our furry friend carried away part of Happy's dead chicken and munched on it up here. He backtracked again, though, and I have a sneaking idea that when we follow it up we'll find that he parks on the lower ledge. This side of those trees down there, Billy—see?" He pointed toward a precipitous cluster of rocks that nestled under the second ledge well shaded by the encroaching pine forest.

"Some bungalow," Donovan observed whimsically. "Shady and cool and out of the rain, huh? Gee, it won't be as hard climbing down there as it was coming up here, I bet."

"Don't bet too much on it, kiddo," said Tom,

swinging around and sitting down on the edge of the ledge. "If you got down there in half an hour you'd be doing well." He inclined his head toward the way they had just come. "That rascal lynx has backtracked from here and edged off into the bush somewhere below. But nix on that for me. I'd rather go the longer way instead of taking chances on the rock—too precipitous."

They opened the lunch, each taking a sandwich. Billy took a fair-sized bite of his and peered fascinatedly down at the clustered rocks.

"You mean to tell me it would take us a half hour to skip down those rocks, Slady?" he asked.

"Skip is good, kiddo. Just try and skip and you'd skip on your ear. You'd be lucky if you could crawl at the rate of a foot a minute. Your little friend Tommy's been through this woods each summer for four years and he happens to know."

"I know, Slady, I believe that, all right, and I can see it's pretty rocky, but what puzzles me is that it looks so near. Why, I bet I could even take a shot at that brush that's blowing in the wind down there. Do you bet I couldn't hit it, Slady?"

"No, I don't bet you *couldn't*—I bet you *could,* Billy," Tom answered, scrutinizing the spot that

Donovan had pointed out. "Shooting that distance and walking it would be quite different. But while we're on the subject, Billy, that isn't the wind that's moving the brush, that's some living thing walking through there."

Billy leaned forward excitedly. "What you mean, Slady?"

"Well, it's moving too slowly to be a deer and we haven't seen a human soul on this side of the mountain since we came, so . . ."

"You mean—it's the lynx?"

"The brush moves that way, doesn't it? See how slowly . . . like you'd expect a lynx to move in the daytime, eh? Would be kind of fun to shoot in the air and see if it made him leap out of the brush, eh?"

"Some fun!" Billy agreed with animation. "Let me shoot it, Slady, huh?"

"Sure, kiddo. I don't know why not. Here—take it."

Donovan took the Winchester and clasped it delightedly. His eyes sparkled and there was a naïveté about the young man that Tom was suddenly aware of. He studied him a moment.

"How old are you, Billy?" he asked briefly.

"Eighteen," answered Billy getting the Winchester in position. "Can I fire over the tops of those trees, Slady?"

"Sure. Babies must play," Tom answered whimsically. "I'll give you your cue. Here goes . . . one . . . two . . . *three!*"

The rifle clicked and the bullet sped its lightning message with a loud report. Came in its wake, a shrill, piercing scream that chilled their blood and brought them to their feet, and though neither spoke in the appalling moment that followed, both realized what had happened.

It was the scream of a human being.

CHAPTER X

TWO DISCOVERIES

A SILENCE followed—a tense silence that Tom broke abruptly when he beheld Donovan's white, pained face. "Billy, kiddo," he said with a ring of feeling in his voice, *"don't!* Whatever's happened it wasn't your fault. Your bullet must have ricocheted and that's happened to the best of us. Just an accident! Now sit down here and don't move until I yell for you to come. And don't worry!"

"But s'pose—I *killed* somebody!" Billy said excitedly. "I couldn't stand that, Slady—I *couldn't* stand that!"

"Sit down there, Billy," Tom said tersely. *"And stay there!"*

He let himself down over the rocks and Billy sat down submissively. "Why can't I go down the other way, Slady?" he asked anxiously.

"Because I want to see what's what first."

"Man alive, I don't see how I'm going to sit here that long. Gee, have a heart, Slady!"

"I have. That's the reason I don't want you to come. If you do, it'll be your own fault. Wait until I call."

He was soon lost to view amongst the trees and Billy sat as he had left him staring with frightened eyes at the brush along the first ledge. Nothing moved there now. Even the wind seemed to have been stilled. Presently the monotonous tip-tap, tip-tap of a woodpecker sounded from some nearby tree. Billy could stand it no longer.

He jumped to his feet and ran blindly toward the trail that Tom and he had just blazed in their upward climb.

A little less than a half hour later, Tom had reached the spot whence the cry had come. He crawled through the brush and came out on a well worn trail that wound around through the rocks and so on through the forest. Here he stopped and looked all about.

A wild rabbit ran across the trail a little ahead and a robin flew hurriedly overhead with a worm dangling from its beak. When the bird had disappeared in the forest, Tom approached the rocks and looked around them, halting abruptly at the sight that met his eyes.

THE WINCHESTER AND LUNCH GAVE MUTE EVIDENCE OF THE YOUNG MAN'S IMPULSIVE FLIGHT.

The Parachute Jumper—A Tom Slade Story. *Page* 68

The lynx lay just this side of the towering trees, on his back with his paws rigid. A bullet had entered just above the left ear. "I'll be gosh darned!" Tom exclaimed, approaching the fallen animal noiselessly.

He leaned over it, touched one of the rigid paws and drew up quickly. "Dead a couple of hours and more," he observed in puzzled tones. "Goodnight, this is good!" He paused to study the ground around the lifeless lynx, running his brown fingers through his hair time and again.

Soon he discovered something. A footprint, then another, and presently he was following them along the trail through the forest. But after a hundred yards he gave it up for he knew that the trail went east and would eventually take him into Harkness, and that meant almost four hours and the uncertainty of running down the culprit at that. And then there was Billy to think of.

"Billy's bullet hit him, that's what," Tom reasoned it out. "And it didn't do him any harm—any serious harm, or he wouldn't have been able to leave his precious kill behind. Whoever it was he got a good scare and ran for his life."

He pulled the rigid body of the lynx off the trail

and into the tangled underbrush. He looked around in that brisk, efficient way of his and hurried away, climbing up on the rocks in an effort to see something of the second ledge where he had left Donovan. The trees and luxuriant growth obstructed his view, however, and he called loudly as he had promised.

His voice echoed and reëchoed, but nothing of Billy's deep crisp tones did he hear. Tom couldn't understand it and called again, only to be shocked by the appalling silence that followed in the wake of the echoes, and before another minute had elapsed he was on his way up the rocky trail.

He came out on the ledge breathlessly and knit his brows with annoyance when he discovered that Donovan had gone. The abandoned Winchester and remaining lunch gave mute evidence of the young man's impulsive flight. Tom picked them up.

"The darn kid," he thought, "he just wouldn't stay where I told him. The question is—where did he go?"

He verged to right and left along the ledge following Billy's hurried tracks. But when he came to the slope whence they had first come it was difficult to pick them out from his own. Nevertheless

he kept doggedly on trusting to luck that Billy would not be so foolhardy as to try any short cuts in that almost trackless wilderness.

He paused now and again to shout but was always met with the same desolate silence and by mid-afternoon he was irritable. It was all sheer perversity on Billy's part, he told himself. Why couldn't he have stayed where he was told? The more he thought of it the angrier he became, or rather he told himself he was angry rather than analyze the true nature of this emotion that overwhelmed him. He wouldn't admit that worry over a boy like Billy would upset him so.

"I'm a soft-hearted fool," he said aloud once when he was searching along the up trail. It was the fourth time he had gone back.

The sun was setting in a flame colored sky when he inspected the "lynx trail," as he called it, for the last time that day. He berated himself for having wasted that whole afternoon on a futile hunt for a disobedient kid when he should have gone straight to camp and telephoned game-warden Crothers of the law-breaker that had shot down the lynx.

He strolled down the slope, footsore and weary, suddenly realizing that he had a hungry headache.

Where the remaining lunch had gone he could not seem to remember. It had probably been dropped in the excitement, he thought, and gripped the Winchester more tightly in a gesture of disgust.

"Wish we had dropped that on our way up," he mumbled, glancing out of the corner of his eye at the gleaming rifle. "It would have saved a lot of time and trouble, believe me."

Time and again, he turned back, scanning the mountain side and far horizon with knitted brows. When he came in sight of the smooth field with his trim little biplane poised so gracefully in the center, he had a sudden hope that Billy might have found his way back to camp and be there now awaiting him.

The supper hour was well over as evidenced by the small groups of training scoutmasters who were lolling about the eats shack porch. Tom hailed them, the sound of his voice bringing Don Ellison and Counsellor Wainwright hurrying out of the lodge to greet him.

"Well hunter," Don Ellison called, "is the lynx dead?"

"And how!" Tom laughed wearily. "Something else is shot, too."

"What—what is?" asked the Counsellor.

"Me," Tom answered. "I don't suppose you've seen anything of the kid, eh?"

"Who—Billy? Oh, that's so—where *is* Billy?" Ellison asked.

"That's what I'm asking you," Tom answered. "That's just what I'd like to know."

CHAPTER XI

A VISITOR

"WHAT'S worrying me is that a rattler might have crossed his path," said Tom worriedly.

He was staring out of one of the rear windows in the lodge. The field beacons gleamed brightly and the shimmering wings of his biplane could be seen midway between the light and the night like some enormous bird poised for flight. He was certain that if Donovan were anywhere on that side of the mountain he would see the beacons.

Don Ellison shrugged his shoulders. "We've done all we could tonight, Tom," he said. "I don't think there's an inch of that side that we missed between the crowd of us, do you?"

"No, I don't," said Tom turning from the window. "But in those nine or ten hours since I saw him last he could have gone miles, perhaps wandered clear to the east side of the mountain."

"Well, let's hope he did that, then," said Ellison.

"He'll be sure to strike a town and that's better than having a tête-à-tête with a rattler, eh?"

"I'll say," Tom agreed. "Did Wainwright go to bed, Don?"

"Sure. So has everyone else. We're the only ones keeping vigil and I don't see any sense of that with those beacons burning. Every June bug and bat in the mountains will be foxtrotting around them till daylight and if they can see them, so should Billy."

"You forget he's not a June bug or a bat," Tom said with a wry smile. "Why, he hasn't even been in the mountains before today. Just a greenhorn city kid—eighteen years old. I guess he was so scared that he couldn't wait for me to yell for him. And I know that he thought he had killed that chap. Sheer panic—that's what made him run—what can you expect of a kid that age?"

"By the way, Wainwright told me you were talking to Crothers," said Ellison, suddenly. "What did he say?"

"Didn't Wainwright tell you?"

"No, he didn't have time then and he said he'd tell me when we got back, but I forgot to ask him in the excitement over this kid."

"Well, it was quite remarkable, I can tell you,"

Tom said. "The minute Crothers heard my voice over the wire he said he'd been expecting to hear from me. It seems that around three o'clock or so this afternoon, a chap went into Doc Crosby's office with a bullet in his arm and said he got it from a poacher's rifle who killed a lynx at his feet and then fired at him. Oh, he had a nice smooth story all right and he thought nothing would come of it because he didn't know but what we *were* poaching. And he had to tell the doc how he came by the bullet so that story was letting himself down easily."

"And you say the lynx was dead for hours when you found him?"

"Two at least. The chap probably killed him while Billy and I were on our way up. Then he ate his lunch, because I discovered a few crumbs under some trees near by. I suppose he was just getting ready to take the pelt when Billy's bullet ricocheted and hit his arm. Like all lawbreakers he thought of his own safety first and forgot the lynx entirely in his rush to get to a doctor."

"Wound wasn't bad, eh?" Ellison asked, turning his back to Tom and pushing a fresh log into the fireplace.

"No. Crosby got the bullet out in five minutes

and he told the chap that it was his duty to notify Crothers in a case of that kind. Well, the chap knew that the pelt was as good as lost to him then, so he just told a good story while he was at it."

"Does Crothers believe it?"

"Like fun he does. He said the minute Crosby told him the story he had a hunch that there was something funny and he told the doc to hold him until he got there. Now Crothers is holding him until further investigation because he says he thinks he's an old offender up on Old Hogback. They've had evidence of deer being shot and squirrels trapped for a long time past and he thinks this fellow is the one they want. But what worries me is, that he wants me to go into Harkness and bring Billy along so that we can give our version of the story."

"Why should it worry you? Crothers gave you the permit to kill that lynx and if some other fellow did it without the right to, it isn't your fault."

"I know, Don. You don't understand. It has nothing to do with this other chap at all. I'd even be glad to help Crothers in the way of punishing him if he's the kind that can't make a living any other way than to slaughter deer and other animals.

What I'm worried about is Billy. Here I've gone and told Crothers that Billy fired over the tops of the trees just to frighten the animal (or what we thought was the animal), and if I can't produce the kid to substantiate my story why Crothers will think there's something a little strange about it. He doesn't like a shot to be fired in these mountains out of season unless there's an absolute necessity and when you fire be sure you've got your mark."

"Did he say that?"

"I'll say he did. He never minces his words. He said he's pretty sure we did him a favor this time, but that if there's any next time, why, we must be certain of our mark and not do any firing over trees or any place else. It might have been an innocent person and killed him, that's what he said. Oh, I know he's not mad at me for what's happened, but he would be if it didn't happen the way it has. He just wants to give us a friendly calling down about aiming at our mark, that's all."

"Then what in goodness' name are you worrying about?" Ellison asked strolling back to the table and facing Tom.

"Billy. It will be embarrassing to have to go in there tomorrow and say that even though the whole

camp was out looking for him tonight, we couldn't find him."

"I can't see why it would be embarrassing, Tom."

"No, I don't suppose you can, because you don't know Crothers like I do. I've known him for four years. He used to be a detective and he's got the detective's mania for wanting explanations. I can't tell him why Billy ran off and is lost when I told him to sit there and wait, because I don't know. Crothers always makes a mountain out of a mole hill and as sure as I'm here he'll want to know all the whys and wherefores of my acquaintance with Billy. He loves to find out things like that, and after all what can I tell him about Billy except that he's a jumper and comes from Mayville, New Jersey."

Ellison sat down on the edge of the big table and studied Tom thoughtfully. "Look here," he said, "are you up a tree about Donovan?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, if you want it straight—all right. I mean about his character, Tom. Don't you think he's kind of too scared of things? Afraid to face facts and all that? I suppose he has courage enough when it comes to jumping but how about having to cater

to his feelings so much about that business down in Oakvale. It was tragic, I'll admit, but then he's not a girl and he's almost a man, and if he's made of the right kind of fiber it's about time he bucked up and stopped looking like a sick cat every time it's mentioned."

"But, gosh . . ." Tom began.

"Gosh, nothing, Tom," said Ellison seriously. "You just got through telling me a little while ago how pale and trembling he got when you heard the scream."

"And I guess I got pale too when I heard it," Tom interposed testily. "What would you have done, Don, laughed tra-la or something? How did he know or how did I know that he *hadn't* killed somebody? That's just what I've been trying to explain to you and it's Crothers' argument too, that we might have killed that chap just as well."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Tom," Ellison said contritely, "I guess I would have been white and shaky too, but not for myself—for the fellow I shot. That's what I'm getting at—I somehow have the feeling that Billy's pallor and shakiness come from . . ."

"Cowardice, eh?" Tom snapped. "Well, I don't agree with you at all, Don. In fact, I disagree with

you entirely. I'd stake my life on Billy every time and if I act as if I'm up a tree about him, it's only because I know he's a queer kid—sensitive and impulsive, but white all the way through."

"All right, Tom," said Ellison. "Have it your own way. Time will tell."

"You bet it will," said Tom stoutly.

Ellison smiled apologetically and was about to speak when they were both startled by the sound of slow footfalls crunching the gravel in the footpath. Tom smiled happily and started for the door.

"It's Billy, I bet," he said. "He sounds as if he's all tired out."

He opened the door with a vigorous swing and just outside in the dark path there halted a long, lanky individual who wore old-fashioned spectacles. He squinted whimsically at Tom, and quite without effort let drop the kit bag he was carrying. It hit the gravel with a loud plop, and its owner strode on up to the doorstep.

"Hello, Tommy," said he, holding out a large, thin hand.

Tom laughed outright and took the proffered hand. "Brent Gaylong! You old rascal! I thought you weren't coming until the end of the season?"

"I wasn't," Brent drawled and stifled a yawn, "but nature changed my plans." He stifled another yawn and crossed the room to shake hands with Ellison. Then he sat down leisurely in the willow rocker. "I'm all tired out, Tommy. I paid a small fortune to a taxi driver to bring me up from Harkness and he got stuck in the mud in your wagon trail a half mile down the road. I just simply left him and came on. There's two more of my bags parked underneath a willow tree down there. It was bad enough carrying myself and one bag."

Tom laughed heartily. The same old Brent, he thought. He hurried out, picked up the abandoned kit bag and looked toward the mountain. It was cool and damp and starless; threatening rain, and not a sign of Donovan. He went briskly in, set down the bag and slammed the door.

Brent crossed his lanky legs and sighed. "It makes me tired to even look at such energy as Tom has this hour of the night," he said to Ellison.

Ellison laughed. "That's what I say, Gaylong," he said sleepily. "We've had a long day and I'm tired, so if you don't mind, I'll turn in and leave you two to hash over things together. I'm glad you're going to stay." Then to Tom he said, "If you de-

cide to sleep tonight, put out the lights when you leave. Got an extra cot in your cabin for Gaylong?"

"Yep," Tom answered. "And don't worry about the lights, Don. As long as Brent is here I'll wait up in my cabin."

Ellison and Counsellor Wainwright occupied two of the apartments off the lodge balcony. Tom preferred one of the cabins, explaining to the counsellor time and again that he was more comfortable and that it seemed more like camping out than bunking in the almost luxurious lodge apartments. He was particularly glad now that he had made that decision for the privacy of his own cabin would be ideal in the present situation. Brent was ever a friend in need and sagacious indeed when one was as perplexed as he was about Billy.

"Gosh, Brent," said he after they were settled in the cabin, "I think an angel must have sent you here at this hour of the night."

Brent sprawled across the cot Tom gave him and shook off his shoes gradually. "Angels had nothing to do with my coming here at this hour of the night, Tomasso," he drawled comically. "Old Mother Nature had a finger in the pie."

"Oh, that's right," Tom said glancing out of the

window, "so you said when you came in. Explain all that."

"Well, I was to escort my mother through the wilds of Canada," Brent explained, punching his pillow into a comfortable mound. When he had satisfactorily accomplished this he laid his head on it and went on. "That's why I first changed my plans about coming here. Then, that same day I 'phoned you, my sister cabled that she was on her way from Europe with her two children and that meant we'd have to postpone the trip for two weeks. This morning both the kids came down with mumps and measles so little Brent packed bag and baggage before the Board of Health came snooping around with its quarantine signs to keep me sitting on the front porch for the next three weeks."

"And that's where Old Mother Nature came in, huh?" Tom asked laughing. "Why blame it on her?"

"I've got to blame it on somebody, Tommy," Brent answered. "It might as well be that old dame as anybody else."

CHAPTER XII

TWO LETTERS

TOM kept Brent awake for the next half hour telling him about Billy Donovan. He left no detail untold, hoping that his friend could throw some light on the young man's strange behavior.

"I wouldn't admit it to Don Ellison, Brent," he said, lying half on and half off his own cot, "but the kid has me puzzled at times. And now this . . . not that I agree with Don's idea at all. The kid's not a coward—I'm certain of it."

"And the only fault you have to find with him is that he's afraid of spooks," Brent said whimsically.

"I didn't say I found fault with it," Tom explained. "It's just that I can't understand his not getting over it. That much I agreed with Don about, but that doesn't say he's a coward. Even the doctor who treated his gashes said he seemed to be suffering terribly from shock and that it sometimes took months to get over it."

"That's why I never can work," Brent said in that inimitable way of his. "I suffer from shock the minute I hear the word 'work.' Yes indeed, I sympathize with this poor Billy."

"Brent, be serious, will you?" Tom said. "Don't you agree with me that it's just shock that's the cause and not cowardice?"

"Tommy, I'll agree with you about anything if you'll only let me sleep," Brent said closing his lids wearily. "I don't like to discuss spooks just before sleeping because I get horrible nightmares. I dream I'm chasing the bogey-man up and down Broadway in my pajamas. I mean the pajamas are on little Brent and not on the bogey-man. Did you ever dream . . ."

"Brent, will you listen," Tom pleaded.

"I'm all ears," drawled Brent drowsily. "That's what the elephant said to the rabbit. Now Tommy, before you find any more fault, there's a letter in my pocket for you from Oakvale, Connecticut. It came from Brentway Airport enclosed in a letter from Billy Rhodes—you know?"

"Oh, yes, the kid in the office there," Tom answered. "I was talking to him that day just before we left for Oakvale."

"Exactly," said Brent. "That's why he sent the letter to me. He had that talk in mind and knowing we were friends he trusted me to forward the letter together with his own remarks. I got them yesterday and intended sending them off to you today when the mumps and measles decided to pay the Gaylongs' house a visit."

Tom smiled, and betook himself toward the chair on which Brent had neatly laid his clothes. "Right or left pocket, Brent?" he asked looking toward his dozing friend.

Brent opened one eyelid lazily. "Right one, Tommy," he answered, looking very comical with just his nose and eyes visible above the covers. The rest of his long, lanky body outlined by the slight eminence of the coverlet from his chin down to his toes looked not unlike an ironing-board in a state of collapse.

"I've got it, I guess," said Tom bringing out a large, white envelope. "You've got your pockets crammed full."

"That's how I beat the Board of Health in Bridgeboro, Tommy," Brent drawled, opening both eyes at once. "I've got five hundred United Cigar coupons in my left pocket and since they quit

giving premiums for them I don't know what to do. I was saving up for a new horn for your Lizzie. The one you have annoys me so. By the way, you still have Lizzie, haven't you?"

"If you mean my Ford, it's parked in the new shed back of the eats shack," Tom said smiling and studying the handwriting on the envelope that was postmarked Oakvale. "And this other is the letter from Billy Rhodes, huh?"

"Uh huh," Brent yawned. "Read that last, Tomasso, I'd like to discuss it with you."

"Think you can keep awake that long?" Tom asked, tearing open the Oakvale envelope.

"If I'm not," Brent said, "just call yoo-hoo." He turned on his side and seemed to fall immediately into a doze.

Tom sat down on the edge of his cot and spread out the letter before him. It read:

Oakvale, Conn.

DEAR SLADE:

Have just come home from the first scout meeting held since we had our famous carnival, and have sat right down to write you about it. In point of fact, I promised the boys of my troop that I would do so.

On their behalf I want to thank you for the splendid co-

operation which you gave us and which (you may be pleased to know) contributed so largely to the success of our rally. It brought no end of tourists and other passers by and that, of course, swelled our admission fund magnificently. Your parachute jumper too, provided his share of the thrill which the boys have by no means forgotten.

And that reminds me (in case you ever see him) that he may be interested to know that nothing has been seen or heard of the courageous young man who gave his life in order to save him. It was very sad.

We have had many visits from divers detectives, some of my boys tell me. They have hunted Two-by-Four Island from end to end and have asked all sorts of questions both about this strange young man whose initials seem to have been W. A. O., and about your parachute jumper—Donovan, I think, was the name. I suppose they are anxious to learn the ill-fated young man's identity and get the mystery off their hands. They have not even been able to find the flat bottomed boat, which in a measure identified him to our citizens in Oakvale. No doubt the deserted craft floated off in the excitement and eventually found its way to the Sound.

That, Slade, is about all the news and before closing want to extend to you a most cordial invitation to visit us again at Oakvale. The boys, of course, join me in that also.

With the very best wishes of First Oakville Troop, B. S. A., am,

Fraternally yours,
(Signed) DAN. CORTLAND,
Scoutmaster.

Tom read the letter again before putting it down, then reached for Billy Rhodes' note to Brent. His brows were knit and a look of perplexity was in his eyes as he spread the notepaper out. The official stamp of the Airport seemed to glare at him for some reason which he could not define:

Brentway Airport,
Brentway, N. J.

DEAR GAYLONG:

Have been holding the enclosed here for three days thinking that perhaps Slade would be dropping in. Guess he's too busy up in the north woods, eh?

Don't know his address up there so trust you to forward it for me. And if you have time, Gaylong, drop him a note and tell him that there have been at least three different cops (plainclothesmen) here inquiring what we knew about Billy Donovan, Slade's jumper on that day he stunted for the Oakvale carnival gang.

Nobody here has been able to tell them a thing—we never even saw Donovan that day. He was late as it was and didn't stop here at the office or anywhere—he ran right past the hangar the mechanics said and in a second Slady and he took off. All I could tell about him was what Slady told me—that he came from Mayville, but the cops said they knew that. They want to know where he is now and I told them they might as well look for a needle in a haystack because a jumper's the most uncertain person in the world. Here today and heaven knows where tomorrow, eh?

Well, as a matter of course you can ask Slady if he knows

what became of him after he dumped him off that day. He can let me know in case any of those dubs come back again. They won't let on what they want the devil for—they're wise guys. Ask a lot of questions, but don't tell anything. So here's hoping they don't find him!

Come over and see me sometime, Gaylong, and tell Slady that he's about due to wing down here. Best regards to you both.

BILLY RHODES.

Tom got up and went over to Brent's cot. He shook the sleeping figure vigorously. "For heaven's sake, Brent," he said worriedly, "what do you suppose they're after Billy for?"

Brent stirred slowly. "What a way to wake a fellow," he drawled sleepily. "Didn't I tell you to call yoo-hoo? It's so much softer than shaking the daylights out of me and roaring into my slumbering senses. Tommy, you'll never learn . . ."

"Brent, listen. . . ."

The cry of a screech owl fell eerily upon the still night and in the distance thunder rumbled ominously. Then a streak of lightning flashed over the lake.

Brent sat up in bed.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE STORM

"I'M TERRIBLY worried, Brent," said Tom, walking to the window and looking out. "It's worse than I suspected. There must be something—I knew there was something on his mind. I've felt it like, do you know what I mean? Don hit the nail on the head the other day—said he acted ghost ridden."

"Cop-ridden fits better, Tommy," Brent yawned drawing his knees up under his chin. "From the sound of those letters, he's quite in demand by the cops, eh?"

Tom turned from the window almost imploringly. "I wish you could see him, Brent. Just once. I wish you could talk to him and see the strong, honest chin he has. And *smile*—say, his smile brings the whole of him to the surface. One of that kind. As nice and frank a smile as you'd want to see. Why

you could no more think of him cheating or being dishonest in any way. . . ."

"You'd never think to look at me that I cheated, either," Brent said whimsically. "For instance, look how I cheated the Board of Health out of quarantining me this morning! Would you think it to look at my kind, honest mug?"

"Can you be serious for two minutes?" Tom asked ignoring Brent's facetiousness.

"I'll even make it three," Brent answered in that funny, lazy way of his. "Have you ever known me to be stingy with time, Tommy? I have it to give away."

"All right, then let's talk this thing out and see what conclusion we come to," said Tom, his eyes ever on the door and windows.

"Let's talk loud so I can't hear the thunder," said Brent pulling the coverlet up around his back.

A swish of rain hit the cabin windows and the storm broke loose in perfect fury. The wind whistled around the camp unceasingly and its cold dampness soon made itself felt within. Tom went to an oil stove he kept in the corner and lighted it.

"There," he said, when the glow had spread completely around the wick, "that will make it more

cheerful. It's a terrible night for that kid to be without shelter."

"Think of the poor sailor on a night like this," Brent said solemnly. "He who goes down to the sea in chips—that's an 'ad' for some soap flake company. Now, Tommy, before you bite my ear off, I'll tell you frankly that I think your young friend, Billy, has given you the slip today. From what you've told me I think he was swept off his feet by that scream and that there's some reason why he didn't want to face the law in explaining the accident. He knew he'd have to do that. Any sensible person would realize that. And now that you read Cortland's letter and Billy's letter doesn't it seem the most reasonable assumption to go on?"

"It does," Tom admitted. "And you don't think what Don said about the coward part. . . ."

"It sounds like pure bunk to me," Brent said, to his evident relief. "Who isn't a coward in some sense? If that chap was running away from the law he wouldn't very well want to bunk into it. Not while he's conscious. He's probably never given it a thought that it looks cowardly to run off like he has. If the cops are after him and he knows it, that's all he's been able to think of. Suppose he's as hon-

est as he looks and that he's got in dutch through no fault of his own? There's a situation, Tommy! Why, if I were innocent and a cop sneaked up behind me and whispered in my ear, 'You're wanted, Gaylong!' do you think I'd turn around and say, 'All right, officer'—huh? Like fun, I would. You'd have the pleasure of seeing little Brent run like the very devil."

Tom could not help smiling. "I know. I guess we're all afraid of the law in some way. And Billy's such a kid. I'd like to think that he was innocent, but from the looks of things, it seems too much to hope for."

"Sure, and that kind of an ending only happens in the movies, anyway," Brent said, dashing Tom's thin hopes. "In real life it's a case of telling your story to twelve good men and true and believe me they're true to their word—*guilty!*"

Tom stopped in the middle of the floor. "Brent, you're heartless. Many people have had things look pretty black against them. Why couldn't it be so with Billy? You said yourself . . ."

"Tomasso, don't ever take me seriously," Brent interposed, lying back on his pillow once more. "Think what you like about your friend Billy, but

don't build any hopes on what I said just before. I wouldn't know the young chap if he punched me in the nose. I was just talking before to drown out the racket that the thunder was making. I hate the darn thing, and if I was a dog I'd crawl under the bed and sleep until it was over, but then I'm not a dog and besides you just won't let me sleep. Now, what were we talking about? Oh, yes, thunder. There's a subject worth discuss . . ."

"Brent, put your head under that pillow and keep it there," Tom snapped. He was in a state betwixt humor and despair.

Brent, however, was not thus disturbed for nothing could ruffle that humorous complacency of his. Indeed, he even did as Tom commanded him, willingly putting his head under the pillow. A few minutes later, Tom heard a muffled snore from that quarter.

The rain and wind lashed the little camp relentlessly and it seemed to Tom as he listened that it made a moaning sort of echo as it swept on to the mountainside. He shivered instinctively, and crossed the room to the oilstove to warm his hands.

"Have you a tarpaulin on your plane, Tommy?" Brent asked from under the pillow.

Tom could not suppress the smile that came to his lips. "I thought I told you to keep your head under the pillow. I thought you were asleep."

"Not as long as you your vigil keep," Brent answered whimsically, bringing his head out from under. "I was just spoofing you, Tommy. Furthermore I didn't have a very good meal on the diner coming up here and little Brent's getting hungry."

"Goodnight, what next?" Tom said. "Do I have to sneak over to the eats shack in this downpour?"

"Not while little Brent is here, Tommy. I have a folding umbrella and a pair of rubbers to match that I got last Christmas and they're in my bag. Wait a minute . . . no, they're not in that bag, come to think of it. They're in the other one that is parked 'neath the willow tree. Poetic but not very practical, eh Tomasso?"

"Mm," Tom agreed. "I'd be a hot looking sketch going out in rubbers up in this neck of the woods. Thanks just the same, Brent, but my boots are handy. You're a darn nuisance. Now I suppose I can start waiting on you for the next three weeks, huh?" he added pulling his boots from under the cot.

"Labors of love when you consider my charm-

ing company, Tommy," Brent murmured lazily. "I might even be able to help you with this mysterious young Billy; who knows?"

Tom pulled on his boots and brought his jacket from a cupboard in the far corner of the room. As he opened the door into the stormy night he said, "I wish you could, Brent, and I wish I knew that you *would!*" The next moment the door closed after him.

He crossed the gravel path shielding his bare head and eyes from the driving rain. His booted feet sloshed in water that must indeed have reached his ankles and his mind instantly centered on the question of proper drainage for the camp. In the four seasons that he had been at the camp they had made little progress toward this end, for every depression in the earth became a puddle and every path a miniature pond even in the lightest storms.

Deep in contemplation of this question he swung around to the side of the eats shack on his way to the back. Suddenly his mind and his body were brought to an abrupt halt by the swish of water. He was not misled for an instant; he knew that someone had accidentally stepped into a deep puddle somewhere near.

"Who's there?" he asked softly but sternly.

There was a deathly stillness and suddenly a bedraggled, hatless figure drew himself up out of the shadow and backed against the side of the rustic building. Instinctively he knew who it was and he was strangely glad.

"Billy," he asked softly, "is it you?"

"Yep," Billy's voice came in almost a whisper, "it's me."

"Good!" said Tom, and for the life of him he did not know why he said it.

CHAPTER XIV

FACING THINGS

Tom stepped forward and put his hand on the young man's khaki-clad shoulders. He was soaking wet and a great deal of water dripped from his hair.

"Come in the kitchen with me, Billy," he said, clasping the boy's shoulder fraternally. "I was on my way there to get Brent Gaylong a snack. He showed up unexpectedly a few hours ago."

"Then I shouldn't have come back," said Billy in a hopeless voice.

"That's just what you should have, kiddo," Tom said as they climbed the porch steps leading to the kitchen door. "Brent can well afford to pay a little board and don't forget for a minute that you're my guest."

"Yeh, but he's an old friend an' maybe there isn't room," Billy ventured in uncertain tones.

"I can always make room for a friend without

discommoding a new friend," Tom said. "You're an especial concern of mine, kiddo. And Brent's very comfortable indeed. He's been covered up to his neck for a couple of hours in an army cot that I keep tucked away for just such emergencies. I've kept him awake telling him all about you. I was terribly worried."

He opened the door into the kitchen and the aroma of its clean warmth fell pleasantly upon their nostrils. The two stove lids from the big coal stove had been tipped slightly to check the banked fire and were reflected in two scarlet crescents upon the dark ceiling. Billy breathed audibly at sight of this homely comfortable scene and Tom was relieved that he made no outcry despite the ghostly aspect that it might have had for him.

"Cozy," Tom commented as they stepped inside. He switched on the light and surveyed the bedraggled looking Billy with a kindly smile. "You look the worse for wear, kiddo. Lucky that I came over, eh? You'll feel and look better for some good hot coffee and a couple of sandwiches. That'll keep you until Happy gets at you to-morrow. I don't mind routing out that much for a snack but I draw the line on mussing up this place with a full

meal. It's Happy's domain with a capital D. Get over here by the fire, Billy, and dry yourself."

Billy smiled wanly and obeyed. Tom provided him with a chair and closed the lids of the stove. He shook it down with the shaker and opened the draughts. In a few moments the wind was whistling gaily through the chimney and little by little the heat made itself felt throughout the spotless room.

Tom hurried around opening and shutting cupboard doors, rattling dishes and cutlery and in ten minutes the delicious fragrance of percolating coffee permeated the room. At a table in the far corner of the room, he was slicing off generous portions of baked Virginia ham and when that was accomplished he placed each portion between large slices of sweet-smelling bread.

Billy smiled that gay, wide smile of his. "Slady, my mouth is actually watering."

"Good, it'll taste ten times better to you then," Tom said without looking up from his task. "Some awful storm for you to have been out in, Billy," he added irrelevantly.

"I know," Billy agreed in a flat voice. "A—A—" he tried to speak, but stopped abruptly and a vivid flush suffused his cheeks.

A queer, tense silence followed that was broken only by Tom's swishing, busy hands. Billy had taken off his shoes and placed them in the oven and during this lull in their talk he opened and shut the big iron door a half dozen times to see if they were dry. Then he contented himself with clasping and unclasping the buckle of his knickers. Finally he turned around.

"Slady—Slady," he said in a steady voice, "why don't you ask me a question?"

Tom looked up and into the boy's earnest face. "What question would you care for, Billy?"

"This is serious, Slady," Billy returned half-rising from his chair. "Why don't you ask me where I've been—why didn't you ask me that right away, huh?"

"I didn't think it was my business, Billy," answered Tom quietly. "I thought you were lost for a while, but after the whole crowd searched tonight and we didn't find you, I changed my mind. I—I thought maybe you just didn't like it here and beat it away while you had the chance. But still I kind of hoped. . . ."

"That I wasn't that kind of a pup, huh?" Billy said. "Well, I'm not, Slady! But I did beat it off,

only not for any reason you know. I almost went off my head when I heard that guy scream—I couldn't believe but what I'd killed him."

"You didn't," Tom said.

"I know it," said Billy. "I went to Harkness after I struck that state road you told me about this morning. I got talking to a feller in a lunch room there and he told me about it. Everybody there seems to know it. I—I was going to take a train and beat it, Slady. Not because I didn't have the backbone to face the results of that shooting, but because it would bring me face to face with something I want to get away from."

Tom winced and pressed hard upon the sandwich he was making. Then it was true after all? No, there was still that element of chance that Brent had talked of and then denied.

"Would you ever think I was a coward, Slady?" Billy asked suddenly.

"No," Tom answered straightway, "I've never thought that and I never will."

"I'm—I'm glad, Slady," said Billy with great relief. "I've been a sort of coward for—for a little while, but all of a sudden in that lunch room tonight I saw things different. I knew I wasn't really

a coward and that I've been kidding myself into bucking something that I shouldn't. That's why I came back."

Tom dropped the sandwich in the making and crossed the room to Billy. He gave him his hand and clasped it heartily. "You're a kid after my own heart, Billy," he said with a ring of feeling in his voice.

Billy gulped. "I—I want to tell . . ."

There came a terrific thumping on the kitchen porch steps and suddenly the door swung open before their startled eyes, revealing a most ludicrous looking figure in the person of Brent Gaylong. He was draped in a raincoat, hatless, and the trouser legs of his pajamas had been rolled up to his knees exposing two long, lanky bare legs and feet. His shoes he hugged under his arm.

"Well, here I am," he drawled, walking with effort toward the stove. "I thought maybe you got mixed up with a sandwich and ate yourself up or drowned in one of those puddles. I almost drowned in one just now. Anyway, I thought I better hunt you up. You've been gone almost an hour, do you know that, Tommy? You mustn't ever keep me in suspense like that again, it's bad for my nerves."

Tom laughed uproariously at Brent's limping gait. "Isn't that my raincoat you've got on?" he asked.

"What of it?" Brent returned with mock disgust. "A true, honest heart beats beneath many a borrowed raincoat and this one is no exception. It's beating too true to-night. I came out fully intending to save you from the stormy depths of Leatherstocking Camp and what do I get for it? A great big laugh and frostbitten feet." He stopped at the stove and bowed gravely to Billy.

"This is Billy Donovan," Tom said quickly. "He's had an awful time of it, Brent. Got lost in the brush and wandered around until he struck the state road and finally got to Harkness. That's where he just came from."

Billy looked at Tom and smiled, gratefully.

Brent sniffed the air. "And we're going to have coffee to celebrate your return, eh Billy? Mmm, I'm glad I came over."

Billy laughed and made way for Brent at the stove. "Sit down, Gaylong, and warm your feet," he said pleasantly.

"I doubt if my feet will ever be warm again," Brent said tragically and taking the proffered

chair. "Can you suggest a remedy for frostbitten feet on the 22nd of July, Billy?"

Billy's answer was inarticulate because of his mirth, and Tom was glad. It was just like Brent to take the situation as he found it, placing Billy at ease with one of his pleasantries.

Tom whistled as he poured the coffee, and smiled.

CHAPTER XV

DISCUSSION

Tom was up a full hour and more before Brent and Billy strolled into the eats shack for breakfast. He had done a half dozen chores and had worked up a good appetite. Therefore he was on the point of being impatient when his two guests put in their appearance.

"It's about time," he said as they seated themselves at the table. "I was on the verge of eating up the knives and forks."

"I don't know why you go to bed at all, Tommy," Brent drawled, unfolding his napkin with slow deliberation. "If you sat up all night you could beat the sunrise."

Tom laughed. "Well, I didn't try to beat the sunrise this morning," he said good-naturedly. "I didn't even get up of my own accord—Wainwright called me out. Crothers 'phoned me at seven and

told me that we shouldn't come in to see him until we hear further. He's been called up the line on something important."

"And what about this guy they're holding?" Billy asked quickly. "What about him?"

"Crothers said he had to let him go. Didn't have enough evidence to hold him on, he said. Not even with our fingers in the pie. I didn't think it would hold water either. Why, I couldn't have sworn that he shot that lynx; I couldn't have sworn that anybody shot it for I didn't see. So there you are. I don't think we'll hear any more about it. Crothers says he may run up here if he gets time. I hope he doesn't, though. He's the snoopiest man I ever did see."

Tom watched Billy covertly and wondered whether he was temporarily relieved, but he was eating and his eyes were on his food. If he had only had a chance to finish that sentence last night—there wouldn't be much opportunity for a like confidence that day and Tom was anxious for him not to slip from the night's admirable resolve.

"Can you suggest something to do after breakfast, Tommy?" Brent asked sipping his coffee. "Something that won't require physical labor."

"Want to take a spin in the bus?" Tom suggested. "I'll give you and Billy the choice of who's going to be first."

"Are you by any chance suggesting that I take a ride in your sky monster, Tommy?" Brent asked with mock horror.

"I am," Tom laughed. "And it isn't a monster, Brent. She's the cutest purring little creature," he winked at Billy. "She does just as she's told, takes me where I want to go and always brings me back safely."

"Well, she wouldn't if I went with you, Tommy," Brent said, seriously this time. "Charlie Hillyer said that I was a jinx in a plane if you remember, and I'll never forget that to the longest day I live."

Tom laughed. "Charlie Hillyer's an army pilot," he explained to Billy. "Brent's been up with him twice and each time they had to kiss the bus good-bye and make a hurried exit. Both were new planes too, weren't they, Brent?"

"Yes, and Charlie had the insolence to say that it was *me*—that I was a *jinx!*" Brent exclaimed with a whimsical air. "It was more like he being the jinx and not me. Each time I landed quite safely

and with minor casualties, having ripped my trousers on each occasion."

Billy was highly amused. "How?" he asked with interest.

"The trees got in my way each time," Brent explained indignantly. "On the first occasion it was an oak tree that wouldn't move out of the way; I hit one of the topmost branches. On the second occasion it was a willow and I weeped for shame, I can tell you, when my rescuers proved to be two girl scouts. They found me in a very embarrassing state for I was depending from a lower limb practically minus my right trouser leg. Charlie suffered no such humiliation and yet he still has the nerve to insist that *I'm* the jinx."

"No, he didn't suffer humiliation," Tom said teasingly. "He suffered a broken leg in the one instance and a broken arm in the other. I'd rather be humiliated any time, wouldn't you, Billy?"

"I'll say," Billy laughed. Then: "Do you believe Gaylong's really a jinx, Slady?"

"I don't know," said Tom. "He's never been up in my bus. I don't know whether I believe in a jinx or not. An awful lot of airmen do, though. I'll admit that it's pretty convincing sometimes. There

are some chaps who can't step foot in one without something going wrong."

"Well, the *Goodfellow* won't go wrong today, or any other day," said Brent, getting out the pipe that he had lately taken to. "You'll never be able to say it of me that I put the jinx on her."

"Aw, I don't believe it about you," said Billy earnestly.

"Neither do I," Tom agreed. "I'd have to be convinced."

"And you may not live to tell it, Tommy," said Brent tragically. "We won't flirt with death, so I'll be quite content if you'll let me get out on the lake and fish and sleep and fish and sleep. Between it I ought to get a lot of fish and a lot of nap."

Tom laughed. "All right, Brent. Just as you say. You won't mind if I take Billy up and show him a few tricks? I promised to teach him the ropes."

"Go as far as you like, Tommy. The earth is the limit. And if you decide to come down in a hurry, don't pick out the lake for your resting place. I don't take kindly to being waked out of my sound sleep." Brent puffed lazily on his pipe and squinted his eyes comically behind his old-fashioned spectacles.

Billy laughed heartily and Tom joined him, happy in the thought that the tragedy of Oakvale Lake was no longer a specter stalking continually before him. The episode on Old Hogback seemed to have thrown him right into the way of finding himself and from the sound of his spirited mirth it promised to be a permanent condition.

The trio left the small rustic building together and went out into the morning sun. It was a dazzling sun and had already dried up the drenched earth and foliage. Only in the shade could they see any signs of the night's storm and from the mountain there blew a hot, dry breeze.

"We're in for a long, dry spell, do you know that?" Tom observed scrutinizing the glaring heavens.

"Well, it's a good thing," said Brent humorously. "After last night I'd enjoy seeing things crackle a little. I thought any minute we'd be swept into the lake. Now if you'll just pick me out a nice boat, Tommy, I'll shove out on the briny deep and let the rest of the planes go by."

"Gee, he's a great guy, all right," Billy observed when Tom and he were donning helmet and goggles preparatory to his lesson. "I'd give a whole lot

to see what he would do to a plane. If he said such blame funny things to that army guy as he does to you, why, I don't wonder that they had two spills. A feller just naturally feels like curling up and busting apart when he starts talking."

Tom smiled. "I'm glad you like Brent, Billy. Some people can't make him out. Wainwright and Ellison can't. They've said time and again that he's too lazy. Well, he is lazy, there's no doubt of that, but believe me, I never saw Brent fail in big things. He gets into action then, you can bet, and after all those are the times to test a fellow's mettle. Big things. He has a heart as big as Old Hogback and if he does drive me crazy with his nonsense I can stand it, knowing him as I do."

Billy smiled and looked off into the distance thoughtfully. Tom wondered whether or not he was going to speak then. Or had Brent completely broken the spell last night? No, Billy would tell, Tom felt certain, but in his own good time. He had changed for the better and it would be dangerous to force the issue now. After all, a day one way or the other wouldn't be fatal.

In truth, Tom did not want to force the issue. To be sure, he had not made this admission to himself

but he knew that to confront Billy with accusations was but to bring to an end a delightful summer friendship with a delightful youngster.

He was more fond of Billy than he realized.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LESSON

A MOMENT later they took off in the sizzling sun and swept into the air with a mighty roar. Just for fun Tom let the plane climb gently, then turned her around toward the lake where he made a few gentle spirals. Then, letting the engine gain momentum he swirled madly three or four times.

Brent, half dozing in his row boat below, was startled into sitting erect and when Tom's mad antics ceased he took out his pocket handkerchief and waved it at the flyers. Billy laughed through the earphone.

"Now you've spoiled his nap, Slady," he said joyfully, "just as he asked you not to."

"I'm just in the mood to want to keep him awake," Tom called back. "He looks too comfortable. Just for spite, I'll keep circling until I think he's good and dizzy."

He was as good as his word and circled the lake breathtakingly. Soon they could see the dark object that was Brent and the boat, moving off under some trees that overhung the peaceful waters of Weir Lake.

"Now he's going to get out of our sight," Billy laughed. "I don't blame him."

"He won't get out of earshot of us though," Tom chuckled. "I'll stay around the neighborhood to keep him constantly in touch with our motor. Now I'm going to shoot over the mountain there, Billy. There's about one hundred acres of meadow land beyond it and when I walk to Harkness that's the way I go. It's a short cut."

As he was talking they flew over the mountain and circled the meadow. It was a peaceful looking spot lying still and green under the glaring sun. Woods and brush surrounded it in a perfect half circle and as Billy stretched his neck over the cockpit he was struck with awe at the precipitous mountain wall that rose up from the fertile looking meadow. There was something formidable and unyielding about it.

"Say, Slady," he called through the 'phone, "how the deuce do you get up that mountain?"

"You don't," Tom answered. "I doubt if a steeplejack could climb that and I'm far from being a steeplejack. There's a road through the lower reaches. It's more like a footpath and it's through woods all the way until you come out on the other side of Weir Lake. I row across. It's a gloomy hike —brush and woods, and not a house. Never meet a soul until you leave the woods and get out on the state road. It's about three miles from there to Harkness, but at that you'd be surprised how much it cuts off."

The *Goodfellow* swung around and over the woods. Tom pointed out that the road ran through there. "You'd need a microscope to see it from the air," he explained. "Sometime, though, I'm going to make a landing in that meadow. There isn't so much space between the woods and the base of the mountain, of course, but if you're pretty accurate you can make it safely with such a nice long runway. And talking about runways and landings, Billy, do you know anything about handling a plane?"

"Something," Billy admitted. "I've been up lots of times and studied the tricks—even I watched closely how to make a landing. In my mind, I've

imagined I could do it fine, but I've never had my hands on the controls nor my feet either."

"All right," said Tom, "put your hands and feet on them. Nothing like getting the feel of 'em." He put both his hands up.

For a few moments Billy followed his movements. He banked the plane in turns, glided downward and climbed. "Now I'm going to give them to you," he said.

With steady head, hands and feet, Billy followed his signals and put the plane through some paces. They circled the meadow several times and there were intervals when Billy made the student's usual blunders. The *Goodfellow's* nose would do the wrong thing, either going up or down, when she should have been going the other way. At those times, Tom would correct the mistake with gentle assurances that he was doing fine, nevertheless.

After a half hour's practice, however, Billy was holding his own. He even suggested a spin.

Tom chuckled. "That's the spirit, Billy," he said. "Never be afraid to try *anything*. You're a born pilot, kiddo. You've got *It!*"

As Tom explained sometime afterward, Billy was always ready to listen. He absorbed Tom's

warnings as to when he should pull her nose up and give her a slap of the gun to pull her into it and asked no questions as to why he should center the controls to pull her out of the dive. Billy asked his questions afterward.

Tom got plenty of altitude, then allowed Billy to handle the stick while he looped her. When this had been accomplished three times the eager pupil was given permission to try it himself.

After the third dive, Tom applauded with a loud, "Whoopee!" And: "Want to skim back over the lake and give Brent the chills and fever? Demonstrate what you can do in the way of a dive, kiddo. Make it two or three—make it as many as you can manage and I'll guarantee that he'll be waving for a respite."

Billy laughed joyously and agreed with boisterous enthusiasm. Soon they were roaring over the lake and Tom could just about make out the prow of Brent's boat gratefully nestling in the shade of the big tree.

"Over we go!" Billy laughed.

Tom yelled, "Atta kid!"

The wind whistled and they dove into it, with the lake seeming to fall behind and the sky like a

huge flat door tilted at a crazy angle. When they rushed out of it and were on an even keel again, they were aware of Brent's boat coming out into view.

"Once is even too much for him, eh Billy?" Tom said. He craned his neck, curiously. "Hmph," he laughed, "he's rowing straight for shore, kiddo. This is good. Just circle gently until I see what he's going to do."

Billy did as he was told and brought the plane lower like a trained pilot so that Tom could see what was going on. Sure enough, Brent trudged up on the bank and walked in the direction of the lodge, only to turn hurriedly and come back to the edge of the lake. Someone else was with him.

"Bring her a little lower, Billy," Tom said. "Now, that's right."

They circled slowly and Tom could see that Brent was waving. So was the figure with him and after discussing it with Billy, they agreed that it was either Wainwright or Ellison. Both were waving their arms vigorously.

"I guess we better go down," Tom said. "Looks as if they want me for something. Can't be lunch time yet, either. Well, it won't hurt to find out.

Here, I'll land her. Just keep your ear tuned and I'll tell you how I do it."

Over the camp they flew, circled around several times, then Tom shut down the motor. And as they glided gracefully across the field, Brent's lanky figure appeared around the side of the lodge coming straight toward them.

CHAPTER XVII

AN OVERCOAT STORY

"WELL, what's all the fuss about?" Tom asked as he jumped down from the cockpit.

"If it wasn't for the quiet life I lead, I wouldn't have enough energy left to tell you," Brent drawled, feigning exhaustion. "Not after your deliberate attempts to make me dizzy, and horrified and sick with apprehension lest you go plop into the lake. Tommy, some day you'll break your neck taking dives like that last one."

"It wasn't me at all, Brent," said Tom proudly. "It was Billy."

"Heavens!" Brent exclaimed. "Now I *know* you're crazy!" Then turning to Billy he said, "You follow him, laddie, and you'll break your bones. He's the craziest fool in the air that I've ever seen and I'm so sure that he's going to have a grand smash some day that I've bought a nice little jar that will just about hold his dust."

Billy went into paroxysms of laughter.

"Well," said Tom, "what was the idea of bringing us down?"

"Oh, yes," said Brent, "that's what I came here to tell you. Crothers called again and Ellison answered and took the message because the old boy said he wouldn't wait until you came down. He was too busy."

"Crothers?" asked Tom. "What does he want, now?"

All signs of Billy's mirth had vanished, Tom noticed instantly as they strolled back toward the lodge.

"He told Ellison that he didn't have to go up the line after all," Brent explained. "Seems that there's been some brush fire reported blowing east and he has to stay at his desk and keep in touch with that too. But he didn't want to see you about that. Ellison said he didn't say what it was except that he mentioned yesterday's incident had nothing to do with it. He wants to see you alone."

Tom was relieved. "Crothers is getting old and childish," he said. "He's the darnedest man for hinting that these solitary conferences he asks you to are terribly important. When you get there you

find out that he's got nothing to say. Oh, maybe he'll ask if we've heard any shots in the neighborhood and do I think that any one's been trapping out of season. But it'll wind up that he wants to talk about baseball and have a game of checkers. Anyway, I won't mind taking a hike down there. I've been sitting in that bus too much lately."

"What's the matter with Lizzie?" asked Brent.

"If you mean my Ford, it's laid up," Tom answered soberly.

"Again?" Brent asked whimsically.

"The best of cars get laid up once in a while, don't they?" Tom returned evasively. "Mine only needs new spark plugs and the engine overhauled."

"A brand new body on that chassis wouldn't go badly either, Tommy," Brent said.

"Well, she'll take me where I want to go until she falls apart," Tom said good-naturedly.

"From the looks of things, that's not a long time off," Brent observed. "And now that I've won that point, is it agreeable to you that Billy and I do something safe and sane while you're gone this afternoon?"

"Whatever you feel like doing is O. K. with me," answered Tom. "I'll probably get back before

sundown if I start right away. Happy can make me up a sandwich and I'll swallow a glass of milk."

"Happy can make up a couple of sandwiches and Billy and I can row you over and dine en route," said Brent. "Then we can take a long afternoon nap close to the heart of nature."

"Again?" Tom teased.

"I didn't do so much as bat an eyelash with you roaring over my head," Brent said. "You even scared away the fish and I'm all tired out from the suspense of watching you."

"You win," said Tom as the trio stopped before the eats shack. "Sleep your heads off this afternoon if you want, only be sure you come back for me after supper. I won't be any later than seven."

"All right," Brent said obligingly, "anything your little heart desires, Tommy. Billy and I won't mind staying there and sleeping a few hours longer in order to be right on the spot when you return. I'd sleep all night to oblige a friend like you."

Tom went up on the eats shack porch and made a playful move to heave one of the rockers at Brent. "You lazy cuss," he said laughing. "I believe you would."

Billy was enjoying the situation immensely and

sat down on the lower porch step. Brent did likewise, crossing his long legs comfortably. Suddenly they heard Tom's voice from the region of Happy's kitchen.

"How many sandwiches can you birds eat?" he asked. "Happy wants to know."

"I've never asked the birds," Brent answered solemnly, "but if you're referring to Billy and me, we can eat three. And make mine on white bread, Tommy. I need the starch."

"I'll say you do," Tom called. "Think you can keep awake long enough for Happy to make them up?"

"Perhaps," Brent drawled, "but don't depend on it too much." Then turning to Billy, he said whimsically, "Don't get the wrong idea of me, laddie. Appearances are deceiving. I'm not really lazy, I just like to be comfortable. When I sleep, I *sleep,* and when I'm otherwise—well, little Brent makes up for lost time. In other words, it pays to have your brain thoroughly rested, then you're ready for whatever comes your way."

A shadow passed over Billy's smiling face and he suddenly looked grim and unhappy. "You made me think of something then, Gaylong. All this

talk (even if it was mostly fooling) about sleep brought something back to me. Man alive, I've never slept really good since it happened."

"About that Oakvale business?" Brent asked without having seemed to question at all.

"Nope," Billy answered impulsively. "I—once went into a movie—the Playland in Newark. Know it?"

"I've heard of it," Brent answered studying Billy thoughtfully. "What happened?"

"Gee, it's a thing that's happened to a lot of people," Billy answered staring toward the lake. "I took off my overcoat—it was a light spring overcoat, and I laid it across some empty seats ahead of me. The theatre was almost deserted then and anyhow I fell sound asleep—that's the point. I had no business to be in that place and I hadn't any business to fall asleep. When I woke up it was late in the afternoon and the theatre was crowded. Man alive, I'll never forget that as long as I live! Was I scared! I looked and asked everybody around but no one had seen my overcoat."

"Did you inquire in the box office?" Brent asked interested.

Billy shrugged his shoulders. "What was the

use? Somebody stole it and that's all there was to it." He turned to Brent appealingly: "I bet you're wondering why I told you all this, huh? Gee, for most fellers an overcoat wouldn't mean much—they could buy another one and that's all there would be to it. But with me, it was a terrible thing because there was something about the coat that spoiled my whole life like. I—I can never be the same, because people wouldn't believe me."

Brent looked at the young man, puzzled. Yes, he was serious about it. There was a look akin to tragedy on his smooth features. And all about a spring overcoat. A hot breeze stirred his unruly hair and blew it down over his forehead.

"You mean you were too poor to buy another overcoat?" Brent asked sympathetically.

Billy smiled sardonically. "Nope, that's just it," he said in almost a whisper. "It was what was in the overcoat, Gaylong. Gee, I didn't think I'd ever tell anybody, but now I have. It just came out, sort of."

"I know," said Brent. "Did you tell Tommy all this?"

"Nope," Billy answered frankly. "I was just going to, when you came in the kitchen last night, but

then I couldn't. I sort of got thinking that maybe Slady wouldn't think it was so much to get fussed up about. Maybe you don't either." Then, as if drawing within his own thoughts once again, he said, "After all it was only an overcoat, huh?"

"But as you said, it's what was in it that counted," Brent reminded him seriously.

"Yeh, but that's like crying over spilled milk, huh?" Billy returned irrelevantly. "It's great how I just let that story pop out. Anyhow I can't be like the guy that grieved himself to death over being accused of stealing another guy's wallet because somebody saw him stoop over to pick something up. They said he was a thief and all he picked up was a piece of string. Do you know that story?"

"Yes," said Brent, very quietly and very thoughtfully. "And are you grieving yourself to death like that man did?"

"I will if I don't stop thinking about it," answered Billy. The poignancy in his voice was not lost upon Brent. "Anyhow I got to quit thinking of it, but now that I've told you, I feel sort of relieved. You can tell it to Slady sometime when I'm not around. I'm ashamed like because it sounds like a whole lot of nothing. Most people wouldn't be-

lieve that a silly thing like that could spoil my life, huh?"

"I believe it, Billy," said Brent with quiet sincerity. "And I know that Tommy would, too."

Billy smiled gratefully and was lost in thought once more. Then when Tom's brisk footsteps were heard coming through the long dining room, he turned to Brent appealingly. "After you tell him, then forget about it, huh? It's just one of those silly stories that I want to forget myself."

"I'm great at forgetting," said Brent. "That's how they got the titles to so many of those popular songs. Especially that one—something about forgetting to remember. Well, that's me, Billy. I'm the guy that forgets to remember."

Brent could forget to remember about so homely, so simple a thing as a light spring overcoat, but he couldn't forget that Billy had told him the truth by concealing the truth.

And by that same token was Brent able to vindicate Billy in the eyes of the world.

CHAPTER XVIII

CURIOSITY

BRENT and Billy set Tom upon his way. He left them anchored at the farther shore of the lake and peacefully munching upon white bread sandwiches and he knew that Brent, at least, would be sound asleep before he reached the state road on his way to Harkness.

He chuckled, then turned his thoughts to what Crothers wanted. "Must have something up his sleeve to call me all the way down there on a scorching day like this," he thought.

He took out his handkerchief and mopped his perspiring head, dreading the thought of hiking along the open road. Even the woods were hot and still and the breeze seemed not to penetrate through the dense foliage. The birds too, twittered with effort.

Luck was with him, however. When he reached the state road a passing motorist gave him a lift

TOM'S EYES FLASHED WITH EXCITEMENT AS HE PERCHED HIMSELF ON THE EDGE OF CROTHER'S DESK.

The Parachute Jumper—A Tom Slade Story. *Page* 134

and it brought him into the little town much sooner than he expected. Therefore he was in pretty good spirits when he climbed the dusty stairs in the Harkness Building to the game-warden's office.

The door was open to allow the passage of a chance breeze and Tom walked right in to find Crothers napping peacefully at his desk. He hailed the big, burly man in a loud voice, waking him instantly.

"Oh, it's you, Slade, eh?" he said rubbing his bulging blue eyes. He smiled sheepishly. "Can't keep awake on a hot day."

"So I noticed," Tom observed. "Well, what's the trouble?"

"Hmph," Crothers said throatily, "smelled any smoke on your way down?"

"A little," Tom admitted. "Couldn't quite make out just how far away it was, though."

"Wa'al, I hear the wind's shifted an' blowin' it west," said the game-warden. "Got a call a little while 'fore you came 'long that the upper part of Mullins' woods is smoking. No flame yet, they said—none to speak of. There's a bunch of men fightin' it at that end 'cause it would go bad with Mullins' orchard. Hope the wind does shift fer

good 'cause there ain't nothin' to harm at the lower end o' th' woods an' a little fire would clear out a lot o' that brush in the meadow."

"That's the way I came," said Tom. "Through the lake road. I hope it doesn't spread too far so I can get back that way. It cuts off a lot. My Lizzie's broken down and Wainwright's rattlebox is being overhauled so we haven't a car in camp. My plane's the only thing that keeps going."

"Wa'al 's a good thing, though person'lly I don't like them things nohow," said Crothers. "I can't see for th' life o' me what good they are to mankind. All they do is kill a body an' I'd ruther git killed natcherally."

"All right, Crothers," said Tom impatiently. "Now let's get back to what you wanted to say."

"Oh, yes," said the game-warden apologetically. "Take a chair, Slade, take a chair. Naow, 'fore we git ter what I want ter tell yer, ef you'll do me a favor an' snoop 'round the woods thar', see how things are going an' jes' call me up 'n let me know when yuh git back ter camp. Not that I'm thinkin' o' gittin' anybody ter fight it thar—'tain't worth savin' them woods 'long th' lake road. All it kin do is ter burn ter th' lake an' thar it stops."

"Yes, well, I don't want it to do any burning to the lake unless I get far ahead of it," said Tom testily. "If you'll hurry and tell me what's on your mind I'll be glad enough to make a report to you when I get back safely."

"Wa'al, don't git frettin' Slade," said the game-warden amiably. "'Tain't travellin' that fast, 'specially when the wind's betwixt 'n between. Yuh'll git back ter camp fine's a fiddle. Naow what I want ter see yer 'specially 'bout is this here feller what yer mentioned, er . . ."

"I thought that business about yesterday was dropped?" Tom asked quickly.

"So 'tis," the game-warden answered. "I couldn't hold that thar feller without more evidence, an' you couldn't give it any more 'n I could. What I wuz more interested in wuz 'bout this feller yer called Billy Donovan. He wuz a . . . a . . ."

"A parachute jumper—a professional jumper," Tom interposed testily. Crothers always irritated him with his tiresome details, and more than usual to-day. "What about him?"

"Wa'al," said Crothers leaning far back in his swivel chair, "this may be jest a—a coincidence, but I thought no harm to call yer in and ask. I saw

something in a Noo York paper—fer two days I saw it an' I jest couldn't rest 'till I asked yer opinion."

Tom's eyes flashed with excitement, but he kept perfectly quiet as he walked over to Crothers' desk and perched himself on the edge of it. The game-warden was bringing a newspaper out of one of the opened drawers.

He spread it out with slow deliberation and traced down one of the columns with a brown, calloused finger. "Here 'tis," he said. "I kep' it folded jest so's ter save time."

Tom bent over the game-warden's shoulder and saw the word PERSONAL at the head of the column. Under it in large type, he read:

INFORMATION WANTED AS TO THE WHEREABOUTS OF WILLIAM (BILLY) DONOVAN OF MAYVILLE, N. J. LAST SEEN AT THAT PLACE ON THE 18TH OF JUNE. KINDLY CALL MAYVILLE 800 OR NOTIFY CHIEF OF POLICE, MAYVILLE, N. J.

Tom felt self-conscious under Crothers' curious stare. He was at a loss for words and was furious with the game-warden for having brought this disconcerting piece of news to his notice. His whole thought was in defense of Billy. "What do they

want of him? Why can't they leave him alone?" Truly, Billy had no greater friend in that moment than Tom.

"Well," he said, after a lengthy silence. "What does that tell me? There may be a thousand Billy Donovans in the world and in Mayville too!"

"Wa'al," said Crothers grinning, "ther may be a thousand of 'em in th' world and more, but I jedge thar ain't that many in this here Mayville. I looked it up and thar ain't more than five thousand in th' whole town. Does this here feller admit he comes from Mayville?"

Tom almost hated Crothers in that moment. His downright snoopiness angered him almost to the point of telling a deliberate lie. "How do I know he comes from Mayville or any place else, Crothers?" he snapped. And, in truth, he said, "He's never admitted anything because I've never really asked him. I'm never concerned with what boys have been or where they come from. It's what they are and where they are when they're in my charge that is my only concern."

"Wa'al, don't git on yer high horse," Crothers said with a slow smile. "I jes' thought it wouldn't be no harm ter ask you. Jes' th' same yer kin quiz

'round an' find out, eh? Then let me know cuz thar might be a reward or somethin'. Naow yer can't tell jest what he's done by that, can yer?"

Tom got down from the desk and started toward the door. "I'll let you know about how things look from the meadow, Crothers," he said quietly. "It's too bad you couldn't have told me all this over the 'phone. It's too hot a day to hike or argue and beat a forest fire in the bargain. Goodbye."

He ran down the stairs while Crothers said something about "quizzin' round Donovan jest th' same." Just before he shut the door of the Harkness Building, the game-warden called, "Jes' say Yes or No on the 'phone about that matter, Slade. I'll know what yer mean."

"You'll know what I mean when I tell you to keep your nose in your own back yard," Tom mumbled.

"What say?" asked the game-warden, coming to the head of the stairs.

"Oh, nothing," said Tom. *"Goodbye!"*

"Goodbye!" came the game-warden's voice.

But Tom did not hear him for he was already half way up the street.

CHAPTER XIX

NEWS

Tom stopped at the post office and asked for the camp mail. There was the usual collection of "ads" and bills and in the little pile he saw a letter for himself which he hastily jammed into his back trouser pocket. The rest were stuffed into other pockets, any place where there was room, and after a few hurried words with the mail clerk, he went on his way.

His mind was in a whirl about Billy and despite his anger with Crothers, he realized that the man's inherent snoopiness was the means which would force the strange issue. At last he could sit down and talk it out with the jumper. At last he had something which gave him the right to demand a straightforward explanation of Billy's singular behavior. There could be no reason now for evasion.

He felt singularly relieved. "I've been as weak as he," he thought, "putting off asking him what was what. Why I've stood for all this, I don't

know, because Don was right when he accused me of being up a tree about the kid. I am and I have been right along, I guess. Ghost-ridden? No, Brent was right—the kid is cop-ridden. Gosh, such a nice, bright kid, too. What on earth are they all after him for?"

He got a lift on a farm truck when he was about halfway along the state road. The driver offered him a place between himself and his helper, but Tom declined courteously saying he would be just as comfortable riding behind. There wasn't any sense in burning his feet over the engine on a day like that, he decided. What breeze there was he got on the clattering end of the truck as it bumped and bounced over the holes in the road.

The sun was dropping toward the west—it must have been not later than five o'clock and they would soon arrive at the lake road. He whiffed the air suspiciously and his nostrils dilated with the acrid smell of pine smoke. Presently they turned a curve in the road and saw, to their consternation, a veritable pall of smoke hanging over the length and breadth of Mullins' Woods. A few sparks and shafts of flame could be seen now and again from the southeastern portion.

The driver brought his truck to an abrupt stop and after conferring with his helper a moment, called back to Tom. "Say, that looks pretty bad, buddy, huh? Think that smoke is up to the lake road?"

"Somewhat," Tom said, "but as long as it's only smoke, I don't care. It's just drifting with the wind, that's all. We'll soon be there and I'll be back in camp and tucked in bed before there are any flames on that road."

"Wa'al, mebbe you're right," said the driver, not very convincingly. "Anyway, I'll step on it, so's yuh have plenty o' time ter sprint."

They joggled along and suddenly Tom thought of the letter in his pocket. He hauled it out carelessly and after a cursory glance at the postmark gave a quick gasp. "May*ville!!*" he exclaimed breathlessly. In frantic haste he pulled out the notepaper and his brows knitted in a puzzled stare at the illiterate scrawl in which the letter was written. Even his name was misspelled.

Mayville, N. J.

MR. TOM SLAD, July 21st.
Letherstocking Camp.

DERE MR. SLAD: I am writing to you becaus they told me at that airpoart what is in Brentway that my son Billy

went with you in your airoplane to that place in Conneticit. That's what they told the police too but the police say to me it ain't any use writing to you or inquiring about him because an airoplane flyer like you wouldn't know what became of my son after he jumped in that parachute from your airoplane and that's why he left home in June like he did becauz I told him he dasn't jump out of no more airoplanes.

But he liked jumpin out of them things better than he did workin on my chicken farm down here and I could afford to give him good wages if he stayed home like a sensibil boy, but no he don't like no hard work so he must do somethin easy like flyin to the ground in them things what they wear (I can't spell that word so you must excuse me Mr. Slad becauz I didn't have all the edukashon I should have becauz I came from a family of farmers what didn't have time for them things) so as I told you before he left home in June and the police found out how he boarded with a friend of his in Newark.

That boy was always foxy like and he used to send that friend to the postoffice in Mayville to get his letters and send them becauz he didn't want to run across me anywheres so's he'd get the talkin to he deserved and now he's in trouble with the police so I'm good and mad. Anyway I don't want he should be a coward so pleas if you should know where he is tell him what I writ and say that he should come home and take what's comin to him becauz I got a lot o' money (even though I can't do so good at letter writing) and I will maybe get him out of trouble if I can.

But if you can't find him pleas write to me and tell me if it ain't no trouble to you and then I will no what to do

next maybe. His father was just like him in his younger days but he got over his wild ways and now he works hard too but it's my farm and I look out for most of the things becaus he ain't no hand to manaj in bisness.

So I hope now that you will be able to write about Billy that you know where he is or something becaus I had a feeling that no matter what the cops said that it wouldn't do no good to write to you I did just the same and I hope I'm rite. No matter if he is a devil he's got a good heart and I miss him whistlin around the house like he always does. Even when I yell at him he used to whistle so you can see why I'd like to know where he is and I hope some day he'll get over his wild ways and wantin to all the time wander away from home which he's been doing since he started to school. Always he was playin instead of doing his lessons.

Well now I'll say goodbye Mr Slad and I hope this does some good so I will thank you and ask you to come and see me sometimes at my big chicken farm in Mayville and I'll give you a couple of fryers to take home and some eggs. At that airpoart they told me how you were a fine airoplane flyer and that's another reason I would like to see you come to my house. They say most of them flyers are crazy but I don't believe it.

Goodbye, Mr. Slad and write soon as I am worriet.

Your friend,

Mrs. Mary Donovan.

Tom crumpled the letter up in his hand. He had a strong desire to laugh aloud and still he was too indignant and too worried to do anything but scowl.

His one thought was that Billy had deliberately lied to him and deceived him.

"He never told me he had a mother," Tom thought. Then in fairness, he said, "No, he mentioned nothing one way or the other that time when I asked him. That's so! He simply said he didn't have anybody depending on him. Well, as far as that goes, he didn't lie—no. But it's deceit just the same and he's deliberately straddled the fence each time."

At that moment the brakes shrieked and the truck stopped with a groaning of rusty parts and loose boards.

"Wa'al," the driver called to Tom. "Here's whar we part company, buddy, an' yer better leg it fer things look pretty black 'long yer way."

The smoke was much worse and the flames were licking steadily up from the southeast. But Tom viewed it indifferently and as he jumped down from the truck and bade them good-bye he told himself that the call-down he would give Billy was going to be far blacker than the pall of smoke that hung over Mullins' Woods.

CHAPTER XX

A FOOL'S CHANCE

TOM hurried along the road and had gone about a mile and a half when he realized that the truck driver's warnings were well founded for the smoke was getting thicker with every minute and soon he was unable to distinguish that patch of crimson sun that had shone through from the west. He coughed and choked and his eyes smarted and before long he was calling himself a fool for not having taken the longer route.

But he knew that he had no one but himself to blame and kept doggedly on hoping that the ominous crackling sound behind him would stay there and not try to dog his footsteps. He was scout and woodsman enough to know the meaning of that sound, and he tried not to think that the crackling noise was a forerunner of the hissing flame that consumed each stately pine within the twinkling of an eye.

The heat soon became well nigh unbearable. He loosened the entire front of his flannel shirt and mopped his neck and face. The smoke had penetrated into his throat and lungs and each breath inhaled was followed by paroxysms of coughing.

Suddenly a booming roar not so far behind told him that the western portion of Mullins' Woods had given way before the god of fire. He had to go on—he had no other choice!

The booming roar continued at intervals and the heat became unbearable. He felt that his back would blister, it was so intense. He broke into a breathless run and told himself that he would beat it at any cost but in his heart he knew that the wind was traveling much faster than he.

Then a singular thing happened. The wind suddenly shifted south and southwest and before he had gained a quarter of a mile, sparks and burning fragments of foliage swept overhead. Once a piece of pine bough swished from somewhere and dropped at his feet, a long red ember. He jumped over it and ran on.

He liked danger and in this instance a neck and

neck race with death was exhilarating. He had not known anything just like it before and the adventure of a mere human like himself defying this raging, merciless element was exciting to say the least.

A cheerful smile lighted his whole countenance and though the heat retarded his progress considerably he told himself that he could laugh at this demon fire. He did not laugh long, however, for at that moment, the hot sizzling wind blew at his feet a charred nest of young birds. All were dead, of course, and the sight stirred him. He hadn't taken into account the helpless ones that this monster could devour and as he broke into a fresh run another terrible boom echoed through the woodland.

He stopped, and he was certain that his heart stopped too. Straight ahead, and about opposite Mullins' Meadow the trees had caught fire. Wind, sparks and burning fragments had accomplished this. He did not try to deceive himself—he was caught in those burning woods like a rat in a trap.

He thought quickly and decided that to make a superhuman run for the meadow was his only hope. There he would be temporarily safe. But in the wake of that thought his hopes fell for in another

moment he remembered that the breeze would outwit him anyway by blowing south and southwest.

It was odd, he thought, that Billy and he should have flown over that way that very morning, discussing as they did the dry appearance of the grass and brush surrounding the meadow. Something ominous in that, too. Well, he'd make a run for it nevertheless and try to scale the precipice although he remembered with some misgivings that it was generally conceded throughout the countryside that no one had ever successfully accomplished that feat without the aid of a stout rope.

"Yes, I have no rope," he thought sardonically, and rushed ahead.

His cheerful bravado of a moment before had given way to grim determination and he dodged through crackling trees and wind-driven embers until the open spaces of Mullins' Meadop appeared at his right. And looming up out of the leaden smoke was the precipice, formidable and unyielding, yet his only hope of escape.

He faced this situation resolutely, tied his handkerchief about his hair and passed safely through a small area of burning brush. And then at last he

rushed out into the meadow and toward the precipice, gratefully inhaling a sudden bit of air that was not smoke laden.

Perhaps he had a fool's chance, he thought. Perhaps . . .

CHAPTER XXI

TRAPPED

TOM looked up at the sheer rocky face of the precipice and wrung his hands. They were bleeding, but he was strangely unaware of any physical pain. His forehead had been gashed just above his right eye and a dull thumping pain had set in but it might just as well have been some one else's suffering for all the thought he gave to it.

His whole thought and attention were given to the unyielding face of the precipice. Three times had he attempted to scale its smooth glass-like wall and three times had he failed. The last time he had climbed only six feet before it dropped him heartlessly back into that meadow which was now surrounded by the roaring, flaming inferno. A half hour at the most and the field would also yield her high, dry brush to the consuming monster.

He shuddered and wrung his hands again. *He had to make it!* Make it or die! He turned his back

toward the meadow and studied the stony face before him. If he could only make the first twenty feet or so the rest would be easy. He was certain that it was no more than that and above it was intersected by rocky crevices that would enable him to pull himself up the rest of the way.

Twenty feet! He laughed grimly. He had just about made six!

But hope springs eternal, and Tom loved life with a fervor that is born of good health. He would find a way—*he would!* So perhaps for the dozenth time he studied that immobile face and tried desperately to pick out a crevice or jagged edge along the length and breadth of the frowning stone wall.

Stoneheart, as it was afterward christened, is an almost perpendicular chaos of rocks and deformed trees. Rising abruptly as it does out of the mountain through which the lake road runs, it stands triumphantly at the south of the meadow surrounded by pine forests and an almost trackless jungle.

It may be readily appreciated, therefore, with what lively anxiety Tom regarded his plight. To the right and to the left of him and behind him,

was one vast trail of flame, and before him the unyielding precipice. He passed one of his bleeding hands across his forehead and uttered a desperate sigh.

Here and there on the stony face he could see the rocky crevices with their jumble of debris and distorted looking trees hanging crazily from the mountain wall. What he would have given to grasp those stunted things—to clasp his hands just once around something that would set his feet in the paths of safety. That something would have to be yielding and Stoneheart was not that. Indeed she would not let him approach within fourteen feet of her grim, gray features.

Each passing moment brought him nearer to despair. The high, dry brush at the edge of the meadow had yielded to the flames. It was only a question of the wind now. If he did not soon find a way he also would have to yield to the roaring monster.

He shuddered and buried his face in his hands. With one last desperate move he hurled himself up over the smooth rock, pressing his hands flat against the stone as a sort of leverage for his straining body. It was a case of pulling by inches or slid-

ing by inches, if you will, and certainly one's strength must soon give out under such terrific strain. And Tom's did.

He slid back into the dry brush, exhausted and bleeding. But he laughed—it was almost a scream. Nevertheless, it relieved the terrible tension under which he had been striving. Now he could face the thing calmly, almost indifferently.

He sat quite still with his back toward the stony face of the precipice and watched the approaching flames. Fifteen minutes perhaps, before they would lick at his feet and slowly but steadily consume him. He thought it all out with calm deliberation.

"I'll just wait," he said in a steady voice. "I'll just wait."

A flash of scarlet sunset showed through the smoke screen that moved relentlessly across the heavens. He looked at it curiously, steadily, until it was once more obliterated by the ever increasing smoke from the farther side of the field. He told himself that it was the last bit of sunset his eyes would ever look upon.

And slowly but surely the leaping flames were bearing down upon him. Certainly it would be not more than ten minutes. . . .

CHAPTER XXII

TO THE RESCUE

BILLY sat up in the boat and rubbed his sleepy eyes. He was choking and coughing and seemed not to comprehend anything for a few minutes. It was these convulsive activities that finally awakened Brent.

"I say, laddie," he murmured whimsically, "this ship ahoy feels like the cradle of the deep."

"Gaylong! Gaylong!" Billy exclaimed excitedly. "*Look!*" He pointed toward the lake road where the fire, like some stealthy, fantastic creature crept steadily along.

Brent, too began to cough. "Heavens!" he said. "I wonder when this started?"

"It woke me up," Billy said, alarmed. "It was in my throat too. Say, let's get out of here!" Then suddenly his face went white and he leaned forward impulsively, putting a hand on Brent's shoulder. "Listen, Gaylong," he said not above a whisper. "What about—*Slady?*"

Brent sat erect. "By George, Billy!" he cried. "That's so." He looked at his wrist watch. "Six twenty, Billy. Ye gods and little fishes! Suppose . . ."

"Gaylong, it must be all along there, huh?" Billy interposed. "Would he—would he take a chance and . . ."

"The wind's changed to south and southwest, Billy," said Brent suddenly. "Since we've been asleep it's changed. But listen," he said, seeing the wild expression in Billy's eyes, "don't get excited until we know. Tom isn't anybody's fool. He wouldn't run into the teeth of a thing like that."

"But we got to do something, Gaylong, in case he got trapped in it!" cried Billy, thoroughly aroused. "I don't know—I just got a hunch about it, that's all."

"Now, you're just excited," said Brent, whose voice was unusually quiet. "We'll row back as fast as we can, Billy, and we'll see if we can get Crothers on the 'phone. Maybe he can tell us what's what."

"Do you know about how long it would take him to hike from down there?" Billy persisted.

"Yes," Brent answered. "If he left there after four that's just about where he'd be."

"Man alive!" Billy gasped. "Let's go!"

They took up the oars and swung the boat around silently. Every now and then Billy would steal an anxious glance at the flaming trees on the lake road and when they reached the camp shore he jumped frantically on the float. Brent's slow movements were driving him to despair.

The supper bell rang as they approached the lodge and unconsciously Brent murmured, "Six thirty."

"Say, for crying . . . Gee, we got to snap it, Gaylong," Billy cried worriedly. "Ten minutes! Why, a guy could burn to a cinder in that time!"

Brent hurried into the lodge, shaking his head at Billy's protestations. "You can't save Tommy by rushing into those flames over there," he said in a shaking voice. "Now just have patience a minute, Billy. If he did take that road we'll have to . . . I don't know. Wait!"

He took up the 'phone and Billy paced restlessly up and down the room, then went and stood just outside the door. His eyes lighted nervously on a big coil of rope that was lying on the float and before he was aware of what he was doing he ran over and picked it up.

When he came back the rope was perched on his shoulder. He stopped at the door of the lodge and listened. Brent was still talking.

"Yes, Crothers," he was saying. "He left after four then, eh? Said he was going the lake road, did he? Well, it's awful—I wish we knew. Yes, the road is in flames. I can see across the lake from where I'm standing now. It'll die out at the water's edge within a half hour. Yes, I'll let you know as soon as we know. Gosh, this is terrible!" he cried as he put down the receiver.

Perhaps Brent had never walked nor talked with such energy as he did in that moment. His long legs brought him to the lodge door without any seeming effort on his part.

"Now, Billy," he said, and looked out.

Billy was nowhere in sight.

Brent stepped down and around the gravel path and got a swift glimpse of the young jumper's legs sprinting past the eats shack with the coil of rope propped on his shoulder. Brent hurried after him, stopping but a moment at the door of the shack to report the bad tidings.

But Billy, being Billy, outwitted them all.

CHAPTER XXIII

CAN HE DO IT?

BILLY never stopped until he reached the plane. With one swoop of his arm the rope swung into the cockpit and he clambered in after it. For a moment his arms and legs shook with excitement. Could he do it?

He would do it!

He drew a long breath. There was the starter—a touch and it whined. Color leaped into the boy's cheeks as the motor roared and he let the engine idle for a moment. Like an alphabet, Tom's instructions seemed indelibly stamped upon his brain, and one by one he was tallying them off.

His eyes were fixed on the temperature gauge until it had worked itself well out of the red. And then as Brent and all the camp occupants (including Happy) came rushing across the field, the plane took off, climbing gently. Billy could see that they

were shouting and pleading but he paid no heed. His hands and feet were firmly on the controls and his mind was on rescuing Slady. That was all that mattered to him.

He was proud and his eyes gleamed with excitement as the *Goodfellow* shot out over the lake and toward the mountain. So far, he had not forgotten one of Tom's cues and besides it was all straight flying.

Just before he reached the mountain he pulled back his stick and climbed. Under his touch the plane seemed to behave like an obedient child. And then he flew into the smoke.

He could see nothing but smoke. Dared he? The plane was about over the meadow now. He looked at the altimeter. Fifteen hundred feet. He circled gently, climbing a little with each spiral until the meter showed eight hundred feet. He leaned over the cockpit.

Yes, it was the meadow. He held his breath, watched his controls, then leaned over again. The fire was already pushing toward the precipice. Suddenly, Billy's attention was arrested by something —a figure down at the foot of the precipice.

His brain whirled frantically and yet when he circled the plane lower he did it without a mistake —she sailed on an even keel without a tremor. Then he leaned over again.

There was no mistake about it that time—the figure was a man, waving frantically to him. Billy closed his eyes. Slady? A little cry escaped him. It must be!

Billy was never quite able to explain afterward how he accomplished that feat. He said it was like some terrible nightmare. All he could remember was that he forgot completely about the plane the instant he was aware that it was Tom at the foot of the precipice.

He said he must have circled without knowing it, bringing the plane lower and lower, having sense enough, of course, to fly close to the precipice side. Then, for a while he kept the plane under control with one hand while he tied one end of the rope around his leg.

That was a feat in itself and he realized that his boy scout training was the means of his tying a good secure knot. After that he purposely forgot to look at his altimeter for he knew that if he

did it would spoil everything. His common sense warned him that he was flying in the face of danger but instinct bade him take a long chance and he did.

Little by little he lowered the rope from the side of the cockpit keeping the plane steady. Then suddenly he was aware that all that was left of it was on his leg. His heart almost failed him in that moment for the question screeched itself in his ears:

Was it going to reach?

Once more he circled the plane and swooped across the field close to the precipice. He knew that to go lower was dangerous for the flames had consumed all but a narrow strip between the precipice and the meadow. *The rope would have to reach!*

He was about over the center of the open space and he let the plane go as slowly as possible. Suddenly he felt the rope tug at his leg. A lump came up in his throat and his mouth felt dry and parched. Smoke made his eyes smart and he closed them for a moment. Then came another tug.

He was sure of it that time.

Once more he controlled the plane with his left hand, hauling at the rope with his right. And to his

joy, it was straining terrifically. He braced himself for the struggle.

Beads of perspiration stood out on his neck and forehead, yet he never weakened for an instant. For with each intake of the rope which he lassoed around his own body, his burden grew heavier. And withal he kept the plane steadily under control.

He circled ever so carefully in order that he might get above the smoke. And when the plane was once more on an even keel he waited fearfully. But his fears were groundless for the rope still strained and pulled at his body.

He could never remember how many times he circled that flaming field before he found himself above the smoke screen. And presently the rope pulled at his body so fiercely that he was hardly able to keep himself inside his belt. That alone prevented certain disaster.

Suddenly the tugging ceased and the rope suddenly went limp. Billy's face went dead white and his hand felt cold and clammy on the stick. Could it be that he had *dropped?*

The poor boy felt sick for a moment and was just about to peer fearfully over the side of the cockpit when he saw something brown flash past

the stanchion to the right. He turned his head for a moment and looked, and the rope around his body gave a sudden tug.

Tom Slade was straddling the fuselage right before his eyes—and laughing at that.

CHAPTER XXIV

A SOCIAL CALL

TOM nodded violently and dropped into the forward cockpit. Immediately he was at the earphone. "Billy, you little rascal, you little devil, you swell kid," he was saying. "You've saved my life and I don't mean maybe. Now what am I going to do about it?"

Billy gulped with sheer delight. "Don't do anything, Slady," he answered with a ring of real feeling in his voice. "It was just luck and—and, gee, I don't know how I did it, honest I don't."

"Well," said Tom with genuine affection in his tones, "I owe you something for that forevermore, kiddo. I never saw such nerve and such courage. Gosh, if you were a scout you'd get a medal made to order for such a trick. You'll get one anyway if I have anything to say about it."

"Aw, forget it, Slady," said Billy with delight-

SUDDENLY THE TUGGING CEASED AND BILLY'S FACE WENT DEAD WHITE.

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ful modesty. "Were you hurt any—that's the question?"

"Nope," Tom answered gaily. "Just a little singed, but it doesn't amount to anything, thanks to you."

"I hope I haven't partly wrecked this bus for you," came Billy's voice. "Gee, I don't know what I was doing."

"It pays to be that way sometimes, kiddo," Tom told him. "And the bus is going O. K., but you must be all worn out pulling me up. Let me take the controls, kiddo—you've done more than your share."

"For an amateur," Billy said with a chuckle.

"Some amateur!" Tom applauded and took the controls. "You've got Old Lady Luck on your side when it comes to flying. It's more than poor Brent can claim, eh?"

"He's a good scout though," Billy said. "But I guess he thought I was crazy when he saw me taking off. I just had a hunch, Slady—I could feel you were down in that place. *Ugh,* you were sure close to the end of things."

They glided over the mountain, over the lake and then circled the camp. "Billy," said Tom, "I was so close to the end of things that I never want

to talk to you about it again. Now I realize how you felt at Oakvale and why you've acted so funny—there are things that people can't talk about easily. I . . ."

"Slady," came Billy's voice unfalteringly. "That's just what I want to talk about now. *Me!* I'm going to tell you the whole thing to-night. When we're alone. You and me and Gaylong. I told him part of the story this afternoon while we were waiting for you to come out of the eats shack. To-night, I'll tell the rest."

"All right, kiddo," said Tom feelingly, "just as you say." And then remembering the letter from Mrs. Mary Donovan, he smiled. "Gosh, what in heaven's name are you going to do when a wild, lazy little devil like him is a brave, courageous scout—all wool and a yard wide? I'm sure I don't know and I'm not sure that I want to know. But there's one thing sure—he hasn't failed in a big thing and that's what counts. I'll leave it to Brent." And that bit of wisdom Tom did not pour into the earphone.

Supper was a gala fête in the eats shack that night. Everyone was in holiday mood, joyous at Tom's rescue and loudly acclaiming his rescuer.

But Billy met these compliments gracefully, modestly protesting that it was just a hunch and sheer luck that he was able to do it.

"And that's heroic enough, believe me," said Don Ellison. "Lots of us haven't backbone enough to act on a good hunch. Don't you say so, Wainwright?"

Counsellor Wainwright agreed heartily and Tom was proud. Billy had proved to them all what he was made of. And Don would never again hint that there might be a shade of yellow in the boy.

At that moment, curiously enough, Tom thought of the letter still reposing in his pocket. It marred the occasion just a little, but the promise that Billy had made in the plane tended to set him at ease. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad as it had first appeared to him. Perhaps it was nothing so terrible.

He convinced himself that it wouldn't be, and fell to eating his supper with zest. Brent too, did his share to enliven the party and they were just about ready to call it a day when the throaty voice of Crothers was heard at the door.

"Wa'al, yer a lucky feller, Slade," he was saying in that purring way that so annoyed Tom. "I hated ter come in and break up yer little party, but you

fellers'll hev ter git on the job and help beat out some fire that's started on this side o' the lake. It's smokin' down at the lower end o' yer wagon trail and frum the looks o' it yer kin keep it frum blowin' up here if yer take it in time."

"Heavens! Do I have to work?" Brent asked in mock alarm. "Does that mean *me?*"

Tom smiled. "You lazy cuss," he murmured. Then he turned to Crothers. "Is anybody down there now?"

"Yep," Crothers answered genially, seating himself alongside the table. "Folks from Upper Valley. They called me up so I thought I'd come up and take a look in here too while I wuz about it and see if yer didn't git yer scalp singed."

Tom frowned. Crothers was snooping again. "He's come specially to see Billy," he thought. "He's got an idea in his head about that kid and he won't rest until he finds out what's what."

"Well, we'll have to work it in shifts then," said the counsellor. "Suppose half of us go for two hours and so on until we're sure the trouble is over?"

"I'm willing for the half of me to go," Brent said

whimsically. "As long as the rest of me can stay home and sleep."

They all laughed.

"Half of our number," the counsellor corrected him, smiling. "Now I've felled your hopes, eh Brent?"

"I'll never be the same again," Brent answered soberly. "Am I to be among the first contingent? I hope so, because the sooner it's over the better."

"Well, I think I'll go too," said Tom. "But Billy is not to go. He's earned his respite from that. . . ."

Billy began to protest but everyone argued him down.

Crothers grinned. "So that there is the hero, eh Slade? Young Donovan—Billy Donovan, eh?" he asked, grinning.

Tom hated the man for that, but he had to hide his feelings for everyone was waiting and watching.

"Sure, this is Billy," Tom said quietly. "He's a friend of mine forevermore, believe me. I'd bust anyone in the eye that didn't treat him to suit me," he added playfully, but there was a hard glint in his eye when he looked at Crothers.

"This isn't any place for me," said Brent. "Do you suggest anything that will make my treatment

of you better, Billy? I haven't any muscle—it's a disease that prevents it, but I can play pinochle very well."

"Suits me," Billy laughed. "That's my middle name. That and card tricks. Slady can tell you."

"So yez likes card tricks, eh?" Crothers asked with a slow smile.

Tom frowned.

"Sure, I like 'em," Billy answered happily. "I know some peachy ones." Then turning to Brent, he said, "I'll show you sometime."

Crothers rose from his chair and yawned. "Got ter git back and keep in touch with things," he said, still smiling at Billy. "Keep me posted 'bout things, eh?"

The counsellor and Ellison escorted him down the wagon trail where he had parked his car. Tom snorted when they were gone. He turned to Brent.

"What is it about that bird that makes me fly off the handle?" he asked.

"Birds of a feather," Brent answered in his lazy drawl. "No, Tommy, I didn't mean that. I understand. He sort of rubs me the wrong way, too."

"He sort of grins too much," Billy said. "One of those grins that means something, huh?"

"That's just about it," Tom answered. "He's the snoopiest man I ever saw. He used to be a detective and he's never been able to get out of the habit of scenting trouble everywhere."

The old shadow passed over Billy's face and Tom caught it. "You look tired, kiddo," he said, quietly. "Go on to bed and we'll talk things over in the morning."

Billy smiled gratefully. "And I won't be sorry to talk, Slady. Believe me!"

Ellison came back to the shack and called from the porch. "How about the four of us taking the first shift, Tom?" he asked. "You and Wainwright, Gaylong and myself?"

"Suits me," Tom answered.

"Are the rest of the chaps willing to crawl out at eleven o'clock?" Ellison asked.

The rest of the chaps, meaning the first contingent of aspiring scoutmasters, were unanimously willing and as soon as they finished the evening meal, hurried off to bed.

Tom and Brent got their coats from the cabin locker, for the usual coolness of an Adirondack night had already descended upon the little camp. Billy was already in bed.

"Sleep well," Tom called to him from the doorway.

"Meaning *me?*" Brent asked, pulling on his coat and walking toward Tom with a kind of whimsical submissiveness.

"You, nothing," Tom said laughing.

"Well," Brent drawled after a long drawn out sigh, "I don't see why this forest fire couldn't just as well keep till morning. I haven't had a wink of sleep all day."

Billy laughed outright. "You didn't do anything else, *but!*" he called out, teasingly.

"I'll get hunk on you tomorrow for that, laddie," Brent warned him. "I'll make you row me back and forth over that lake about skeenteen times."

Billy laughed. "All right," he said. "Anyway, an awful lot could happen before then so I won't worry about it."

Tom laughed at Billy's flippant rejoinder, but before twenty-four hours had passed over their heads he realized that it had been portentous.

CHAPTER XXV

REVEALED

Tom, Brent, Billy, and Ellison lingered over a late breakfast the next morning. All the others had left the eats shack and it was pleasant and quiet sitting there as they were discussing the stirring episode of the previous day.

Ellison had first brought up the subject and Tom ascribed it to contrition, for Don was persistent in his handsome compliments to Billy.

"I got Wainwright to sit down and write to the Carnegie Foundation about it last night when we got back," he said quite excitedly. "Why, I think it's one of the greatest bits of heroism I've heard of in years."

"Say, for the love of Mike," Billy protested. "You'll have me blushing like a girl."

Don laughed. "Nevertheless, I can't get over it," he persisted. "How you—just a novice at flying

—could do a stunt like that! By George, I can't understand yet what kept the plane from catching afire."

Tom smiled at his enthusiasm and glanced out through the window which was just beyond the big table. There was a steady drizzling rain that had started in the night, putting out the fires and enabling the weary men to rest peacefully in their beds.

"I'll never complain about rain again," Tom said thoughtfully. "Rain will always stop, eh Billy?"

Suddenly they were startled by heavy, hurried footsteps on the porch outside and without warning, Counsellor Wainwright threw open the door. He looked worried as he came in and behind him were two men.

"Slade," he said to Tom, "these fellows have come on a peculiar errand. It seems Crothers telegraphed them last night. . . ."

One of the men pushed past the counsellor and studied the faces at the table. Suddenly his eyes lighted up noticeably when he looked at Billy.

"Ho," he said almost sneeringly, "so you're the bozo what calls himself Billy Donovan, huh?"

Billy's face became as chalk but he did not move. "Yes, I call myself Billy Donovan," he said bravely. "What of it?"

Tom stirred uneasily and threw his arm about the back of Billy's chair. The other man stepped forward at that juncture and joined his companion in the sneer.

"Some alias, all right," he laughed. "Where do you get that Donovan stuff, *Overton?*"

Billy grew taut in his chair, but said nothing.

"Overton!" Tom repeated. "What's all this and who are you?"

Both men pulled their coats away revealing badges. They smiled at the gaping, questioning faces of their small audience.

"We're from Noo York City—see!" said the taller man insolently. "And we're here with a warrant for Billy Overton's arrest."

Tom laughed sardonically. "Well, this isn't Billy Overton," he said striving to make his voice steady. "This is Billy Donovan—I ought to know."

"You know, me eye!" the smaller man retorted. "Billy Donovan got drownded in Oakvale Lake, Connecticut, and we've been tracin' this here bozo ever since then, so don't try any back talk."

"Yeh, and anyways we gotta beat it back and get that noon train fer the city," the taller detective interposed. "Come on, Billy Overton—no monkey business!" He put his hand in his pocket and brought out something gleaming.

"I didn't do it—I didn't do it!" cried Billy desperately. "I tell you. . . ."

"Oh, so you do admit that you're Overton, eh?" the taller detective said. "Do you admit you stole them bonds too?"

"I—I——" poor Billy stammered.

Tom turned to him and the expression in his eyes made Billy wince.

"Is it true then, Billy?" Tom asked. "You are—*Overton?* You did deceive me about that, too?" There was something akin to pain in his voice.

"I can—explain, Slady," Billy pleaded pitifully. "I. . . ."

"Aw, come on," said the smaller detective. "Put them on him, Charlie, and let's get away from this neck of the woods. The kid can do his explainin' tuh Hollis and Crawford, the guys he stole them bonds from."

Billy was whisked out of the door, frantically trying to explain something to Tom about a light

spring overcoat. Poor Tom was too stunned to understand. Only Brent, of all that wide-eyed group, was suddenly stirred into action, for he arose from his chair and walked straight toward the door.

"I've got something to do in New York and Jersey myself, Tommy," he said. "I just happened to think of it so if you don't mind, I'll try and catch that noon train myself. If I'm not back tonight, you'll see me tomorrow."

"All right," said Tom listlessly. And turning to Ellison, he said, "Don, I'd never have thought it of that kid—I really wouldn't."

"Well," said Don with a complacent shrug of his shoulders. "I told you so, didn't I?"

Tom looked up at him, suddenly disgusted. "Couldn't you say something in his defense—now that he's apparently licked?" he asked indignantly. "Is that sporting or being a scout?"

Don looked uncomfortable, but obviously decided to stick to his guns. "What more could I say?" he retorted. "I didn't say anything against him—I just spoke the truth. I said I was suspicious of him in the beginning and I was. . . ."

"You make me sick and tired, Don. You were only raving about what a hero he was—not two

minutes ago! Have you forgotten what a bully little scout he was last night? Gosh, when I think of that. . . ."

"That doesn't excuse him for stealing," Don returned with the dogged persistence of his kind. "A thief is. . . ."

"I'd like to wring your neck," Tom interposed, and left the shack.

CHAPTER XXVI

BRENT FIXES THINGS

AND that's the story he told me about the light spring overcoat," said Brent the next afternoon. He had come up from New York and Tom and he had straightway put off in a boat to discuss the matter. "That's what got me started, Tommy."

"And then what, Brent?" asked Tom, interested.

"Well, when I heard the poor kid trying to get that over to us about the overcoat it came to me in a flash," Brent answered. "I don't get many flashes in my life, Tommy. This was one of the few. But all of a sudden it came to me and I remembered that I'd seen his picture in the paper saying that he had been a messenger for those Hollis and Crawford people. He had been entrusted with fifty thousand dollars' worth of Liberty Bonds and he was to deliver them at the branch office of the firm in Newark."

"And you saw that in the paper?"

"Absitively, Tommy. And also I saw that the police had traced him to the Playland Theatre in Newark. That's where he had last been seen."

"Mm," said Tom. "He lived in Newark too, did he?"

"Righto," Brent said, leaning lazily over the side of the boat and trailing his hands in the water. "And he told you the truth about having no one to depend on him—he's been an orphan for two years."

"Poor kid," said Tom.

"I knew that would arouse the mother instinct in you, Tommy," said Brent whimsically. "So to get back to my little story, I immediately remembered what he told me about his overcoat in the Playland Theatre. What puzzled me was the Donovan business. If he had been going under his own name I would have remembered that whole thing right away. It was broadcast all over the country. His picture was in the papers and in every public place. It even told that he was known to be fond of card tricks."

"I know," said Tom sadly. "That's how he gave himself away to Crothers that night—that, and

the old snooper recognizing him from his pictures."

"Well, it's a good thing it happened," said Brent. "I didn't lose any time in going to the Playland Theatre, yesterday. The kid insisted that day that his overcoat was stolen. And as long as hunches are so plentiful around here, I decided to have one too, so I strolled over to the box office of the theatre and made some inquiries about an overcoat that had been lost in their dump on the 17th of June."

"I bet they laughed at you, didn't they?" Tom asked anxiously.

"Not on your collar button, Tommy," Brent drawled. "They escorted me very graciously into a room behind the lobby and there I was invited to inspect a ton of overcoats that were lying about on chairs and tables. Any time you're hard up for an overcoat of any kind—that's the place to go. Just say you lost one and that gives you the open sesame. If it hadn't been such a hot day I would have carried a couple out on my arm to save for a rainy day."

Tom laughed in spite of himself. "Stop your kidding, Brent."

"There were ladies' pocketbooks by the score," Brent continued. "None of them had any money in

them, though. I guess the theatre took charge of that. But at any rate, I hunted through the pile of overcoats until I came to a light gray one. Funny, wasn't it—it was the only light gray one in the bunch. You should have seen me go through those pockets, Tommy—I was really excited. Finally I felt something bulky and I searched, and inside of a secret pocket that was in the lining, I brought out a little bundle wrapped in brown paper and fastened with an elastic band."

"The bonds?" Tom asked, excitedly.

"Yep," answered Brent. "That's what. I took overcoat and all and I scooted over to Hollis and Crawford in New York. They were some delighted you can bet and they offered me a reward which I graciously declined. 'Take your gold,' says I, 'and release the bird in the gilded cage.' "

"No fooling," said Tom eagerly. "What then?"

"They told me that Billy had told them the same story about how he had fallen asleep in the theatre. And it seems that when he realized he had been playing hookey for the whole afternoon instead of going straight to their branch office he got panic stricken. He couldn't face them and to make things worse he picked up a tabloid and read of a case

that seemed similar to his where a messenger couldn't give a straightforward story of what happened to some valuable bonds that were given him and they sent him to prison for a long term."

"And the poor kid thought that they wouldn't believe him, I suppose?"

"That was it," Brent said. "He just got panicky, drew his money out of the bank, which was two hundred bucks, and fled for the desert isle of Two-by-Four. He had camped there one summer a few years back and that's how he knew about it."

"Well, I never," Tom said compassionately, "he would have wrecked himself completely. Gosh, but he suffered over it. I can realize that now. And he tried to tell me about it so many times. That was the pitiful part of it. I suppose it was just as he told you, that he knew people would think he was lying."

"Well, he knew that little Brent believed him. He found in me the true, fatherly spirit."

Tom made a gesture as if to throw his oar at Brent. "Did you see him after all this discussion?"

"No," Brent answered. "I thought it would be less embarrassing if I sent him a note. He had to wait for some kind of proceedings before he could get out of the cage so I wrote him that he was to

come right straight out to Mama Slade and you could break your necks together."

"Bet your life," Tom agreed good humoredly. "He'll make a mark in the air some day, you wait and see!"

"Mark is good, Tommy," Brent said. "Under your tuition he'll make a good-sized dent in the earth."

"You crabby old pest," Tom laughed. "Billy will make a second Lindbergh. But never mind that now —what's bothering me, is Mrs. Donovan."

"You mean 'your friend, Mrs. Mary'?" Brent asked with a quizzical squint of his eyes.

"It isn't any laughing matter, Brent," said Tom. "That's a pretty hard task, to tell her that her son is dead. That's the one thing I feel sore at Billy for— he shouldn't have deceived me that way. He just fell right into it somehow when I called him Donovan. I didn't know the difference because I hadn't seen the chap without his goggles, and he got to the airport so late that day that we didn't have a chance to speak hardly before we took off. The poor fellow —I wonder where he is?"

"If he's been sailing around the Sound this long —he isn't," Brent answered whimsically. "But hon-

estly, Tommy, I don't see how you fell into the trap so easily. How about their clothes?"

"That was just it," said Tom, "they both wore white sweaters and white trousers, so how was I to know? The only thing that puzzled me right along was the whistle. Poor Donovan could whistle like a bird and he was a happy-go-lucky bird from all accounts. Gosh, I wish I didn't have to write to his mother."

"Go down and see her," Brent said in his lazy way. "She invited you. But don't forget to bring back those fryers and eggs that she promised. It isn't often that you get something for nothing these days, Tommy."

Tom smiled. "It's funny how it's all coming back to me now," he said. "I just happened to think that Donovan had a silver snake ring on his finger when he shook hands with me that day at the airport. I wonder why that never occurred to me before."

"Because you liked Billy Overton and you also like to be fooled, Tommy Slade," said Brent with parental severity. "Deny it if you dare."

"I won't deny it," said Tom with a chuckle, "even if I dared."

CHAPTER XXVII

BILLY DONOVAN

THEY were washing up for supper that evening, when Counsellor Wainwright called over that there was a young man to see them.

"Send him over," Tom said chuckling.

"Think it's Billy so soon?" Brent asked.

"Who else?" Tom returned.

But they were both mistaken for presently a knock came at the door, and when Tom opened it there stood before them a strange young man with laughing eyes and a wide, good-natured mouth.

"Hallo," said Tom pleasantly. "Want to see me?"

"In a way, yes, and in another way, no," grinned the young man. "I came tuh see a guy named Billy Donovan."

"Come inside," said Tom.

The young man accepted the invitation readily and with refreshing nonchalance straddled the one

chair that the cabin boasted. He smiled broadly and flung his gay looking straw hat on Tom's bed.

"Mountains ain't any cooler than the city in the daytime," he said genially. "Dis sure is one hot boig if you ask me."

"How did you find out that Billy Donovan was up here?" Tom asked suspiciously.

"From de Brentway Airport ginks," answered the young man briefly. "I want tuh speak tuh him on important biz."

Tom smiled. "Billy Donovan wasn't here in this camp, fellow," he said, "but a chap named Billy Overton was. Do you know him?"

The young man scratched his head and squinted his eyes, puzzled. "Say, have I got dis straight—you say Billy Donovan wasn't here, but Billy Overton was?"

"That's what I said," Tom answered.

The young man seemed more puzzled than ever for a moment. Then: "What's he—where's dis other gink, Billy Overton, then, huh?"

Brent and Tom exchanged significant glances.

"Gosh," said Tom breathlessly. "This is good." And then at Brent's silent instigation he said, "Billy Overton was in trouble today."

"Arrested?" asked the young man excitedly.

"Yes, but he's out now," said Tom. "Why, how did you know all this? Have you seen him?"

"I ain't seen him in a month," answered the young man. "But you say he's all right now, huh? He's out?"

"I'm expecting him on the evening train at Harkness," Tom said. "And now that I've told you all this, I think you ought to explain a little—tell us who you are, for instance."

The young man grinned and his teeth gleamed. "I guess dat won't hurt none either," he said pleasantly. "Long as he's oke now an' told you his right monicker, I can stand the gaff. But I bet yuh boots yuh remember me, Slady—Donovan—Billy Donovan? *Dat's me!*"

Tom stood and simply stared at the young man as if he had seen a ghost. Brent flung himself across his cot.

"You weren't drowned in the Sound or eaten up by some nice little fishes, were you?" he asked whimsically.

"Not so's youse guys can notice it," came the strange reply.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SOME EXPLANATIONS

TOM walked over to this young man who claimed to be Billy Donovan and touched him. "You're real at least," he said humorously. "But I'll be darned if I can make head or tail of this thing."

"Well, I offered to let dis Overton guy take my name," said the real Donovan naïvely. "I came down in de 'chute an' I sure thought it was all over for me but de bells and flowers."

"Then it is you, all right," said Tom in amazement.

"Sure, it's me with a capital M," said Donovan with a free and easy air. "But dis here guy Overton was fishin' an' he jumps overboard and comes for me. *Goodnight,* is that guy some swimmer—*phew!*" Here Donovan paused to whistle. "Say, he shot across dat water and before I knew it, he had me cut loose. I got panicky kind of and I made a

grab for him and I jabbed him with his own knife."

"Oh," said Tom. "That was it, eh?"

"Yeh," said Donovan rocking back and forth on the chair. "Anyways he brought me to my senses and floated me to his boat. When I got in it I realized what a narrow squeak I had and I says to him that I'd do anythin' for a guy what saved my life. 'Anything?' he asks me kind of funny like and I said yes. So then he laughs kind of quick like and says he wished he had my shoes and my name.

"At first I thought de guy was crazy, but no I saw he wasn't. So I told him I didn't care what name I had and he took me right up on it and told me he wished he could be somebody else for a little while until he knew what he could do. So he laughs when he asks me if I'd come over on the island when no one was around and he'd tell me. So I asked him what was the matter with telling me then 'cause I knew dat youse guys wouldn't get up to that cove in such a hurry."

"And you were in the boat talking about this?" Brent asked.

"So help me," said Donovan with a grin. "It was sport. Anyway Overton tells me he's accused of a big deal and dat he once read a story about a

feller bein' able to make people believe he was dead so's he could make out he was somebody else. So dat's what he wanted to do and he asks me right off if I'd be willin' to make out I was dead so he could make the cops think it was himself. Then he'd be me? Get de dope?"

"Phew!" said Tom.

"Dat's straight, Slady," said Donovan proudly. "Besides he said he'd give me de two hundred smackers he just drew out of de bank and I would only have to keep away for the summer until he could go out west or some place where he wasn't known. Baby, dat two hundred smackers sounded good to me so I looked around quick and saw dat nobody was in sight yet, so I tells him how you didn't even see my face and dat he could start right in bein' Billy Donovan de minute he was rescued."

Tom gave way to an uncontrollable fit of laughter. "What a couple of kids you were to think you could play a game like that. You might have known there'd be a trip up some time."

"Sure, we did," Donovan admitted airily. "We only agreed on it for de summer an' I thought dat was pretty good pay for playin' I was dead. I just felt like roamin' and I did, and dat money

came in pretty soft. Anyhow, I guess Overton fooled you for a while."

"A long while it seems to me," Tom admitted. "But then you didn't tell us the rest of the story, Donovan."

"Oh yeh. There ain't much to tell about Overton except dat he asked me what your name was and den I rowed off quick in de boat and hid myself 'way down in the marshes in de cove. After them Oakvale guys got through snoopin' around I rowed down to de Sound and I had a great time knockin' around Connecticut. Now I only got money enough for gas to get me home."

"You got a car?" Tom asked.

"Yeh, what dere is of it," Donovan grinned. "I swapped de boat in for it, but it's been takin' me places I wouldn't see no way else."

"Behold the vagabond," said Brent.

"And was Overton just faking when we were rescuing him—supposedly?" Tom asked with a wry smile.

"Naw, dat was straight," Donovan answered. "I cut him up awful and he was even getting weak while we were talkin'. But he was lucky just de same tuh have you bring him up tuh such a nice place."

"What did you want to see Billy Overton for then, Donovan?" Brent asked curiously.

Donovan smiled broadly. "Gee whiz, I sure get off my track, don't I? Well, when my money run out I got thinkin' about my mother and I began thinkin' how she'd be stewin' her head off and how she'd have a Chink's fit if she heard I was dead."

Tom gave him the letter from his mother, telling him to read it. When he had finished he shook his head violently. "Ain't dat lucky I'm makin' tracks for home, huh? Holy gee, I'll get it for about two hours after I poke my nose inside dat door."

Tom laughed. "Well, it'll be worth it to get home and ease her mind, eh Donovan?" he said. "At any rate, you don't have to get Overton to release you from the dead."

"Nope," said Donovan thoughtfully. "Anyway, he's a nice guy, Overton. Even if I didn't talk to him for more than a few minutes, I liked him and I wouldn't play I'm dead for many guys, I know dat."

Suddenly a light dawned in Tom's eyes. "Donovan," he said, "what would the police be wanting you for? Did you read that in your mother's letter?"

Donovan laughed loudly and nodded his head. "Sure, I read it," he said, "and what's more that was another thing what was on my mind. The cops down in Perth Amboy gave me a ticket that day when I was on my way to de airport. Goodnight, I forgot all about it too and I guess they've been pesterin' my mother like anything."

Tom laughed heartily. "Well, as long as it's nothing more serious than a ticket, Donovan, you're all right."

Donovan agreed, but as he rose to go, he looked around pensively. "I ain't jumpin' with joy about going home alone, Slady," he announced. "I—I was wonderin' if you'd mind going along and help me explain, huh? My old lady won't believe what I tell her."

"Well, I'd like to," Tom admitted, "but I haven't the time."

"Remember what I said about getting something for nothing, Tommy," Brent warned him. "You got a gilt edged invitation and this camp can wait until you get back."

"What's this—a word for yourself, Brent?" Tom asked.

"Sure," said Brent quizzically. "Have you got

an extra chicken on your chicken farm for little Brent, Donovan?"

"I'll tell the world," said Donovan heartily. "All of yuh come and Mom'll put up a big dinner. She'll think that's fine."

"Can you wait until tomorrow, Donovan?" Tom asked. "Billy won't get back until late and we might as well include him—sort of a little celebration for the wanderer's return, eh?"

"Oke," said Donovan, and immediately proceeded to make himself at home.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE JINX

EARLY the next morning they had a visitor in the person of Charlie Hillyer, Brent's army friend. He came, as he explained, in his brand new cabin plane, to show the new in place of the old.

"I suppose that's a hint for me, eh laddie?" Brent drawled lazily.

"By no means, Brent," Charlie returned with a significant wink at Tom. "All you do is look sideways at my planes and they curl right up."

Tom laughed. "That's too bad, Charlie," he said, "because I was going to ask you if you could give Brent a lift down to a place called Mayville, New Jersey. We've got a big date down there for a big chicken dinner and Donovan here has invited us but it seems that his car has completely broken down."

"Am I invited to the dinner if I give your friend Overton and Donovan the lift?" Charlie wanted to know.

"And I take Brent?" Tom returned.

"Ab-solutely," said Charlie.

"You're as crazy as he is," said Tom. "Sure, I'll take him if you refuse. You don't think I'd let a little thing like a jinx stand in my way of a good chicken dinner! What do you say, Donovan—want to ride in Charlie's bus?"

"Positively!" Donovan replied, scanning the plane with an appreciative eye. "You can have my car and sell it for junk."

"Don't tell him that," said Brent. "He's got junk enough of his own to get rid of first."

"Meaning Lizzie?" Tom asked.

"Meaning Lizzie," Brent answered.

And so it was a gay party that left Leatherstocking Camp that morning, Brent and Tom in the *Goodfellow* and Donovan and Overton in Hillyer's new plane.

They waved frantically to each other for a time but soon Hillyer's plane left the *Goodfellow* behind. Brent lamented that perhaps they might eat all of the chicken if they got there first.

"On a chicken farm?" Tom reminded him through the earphone.

"That's so, Tommy," said Brent. "The thought

of that dinner is making me forgetful. I'm absent minded."

"You always are," said Tom and pushed the sturdy little *Goodfellow* ahead.

They did not succeed in catching up to Hillyer however, nor did they succeed in reaching Mrs. Donovan's chicken farm that day. A telegram came to the farm late that afternoon, addressed to Billy Overton.

Billy read it aloud over the steaming luscious platter of chicken that Mrs. Donovan had brought in from the kitchen. It stated:

HAD TO MAKE LANDING ABOVE ALBANY ACCOUNT OF CRIPPLED WING. DON'T KNOW HOW IT HAPPENED. WILL SEE YOU BACK AT CAMP TOMORROW TELL CHARLIE TO BRING YOU. BRENT SENDS REGARDS TO THE CHICKEN AND SAYS TELL MRS. D. HE'S FOND OF IT AND FLYERS ARE NOT CRAZY.

(Signed) SLADY.

"Now, who says he's not a jinx!" Charlie Hillyer exclaimed.

"Man alive, it seems so, huh?" said Billy. "I do believe it now."

"*Believe it*—I'm sure of it!" Charlie said. "And if Slady gets back to camp with that bird, I'll say his luck is changing."

And Charlie was right for Brent and Tom did not go back to camp in the plane the next day. They took the train. In taking off from the field outside of Albany the newly repaired wing was hopelessly crippled in some unaccountable fashion.

Tom is ready to talk about the jinx now. He believes in it firmly. But that's another story.

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